

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



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FEATURE ARTICLE

A Caliphate under Strain

Newly obtained documents reveal a pressured Islamic State
AYMENN AL-TAMIMI

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Juan C. Zarate

FORMER DEPUTY NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR FOR COMBATING TERRORISM

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FROM THE EDITOR

A batch of apparent Islamic State administrative documents obtained by Aymenn al-Tamimi and published for the first time in the cover story of our April issue sheds new light on how the Islamic State has come under strain militarily, financially, and administratively as it loses territory and is degraded by coalition airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. Although it is not feasible to verify their authenticity with Islamic State operatives, al-Tamimi argues their format and appearance do not raise any red flags. In our interview, Juan Zarate, who from 2005 to 2009 served as Deputy National Security Advisor for Combating Terrorism, weighs in on the evolution of the terrorist threat and explains how the United States can stem the flow of terrorist financing and help win the battle for hearts and minds.

Christopher Anzalone finds the Somali jihadi group al-Shabaab has proven "remarkably resilient" in the wake of territorial losses thanks to a pragmatic strategy that blends guerilla warfare with terrorist attacks on soft targets and an internal security network that has so far helped ward off a strong challenge from Islamic State sympathizers. With President Obama visiting Saudi Arabia this week, Chris Zambelis examines what he calls "The Kingdom's Perfect Storm," warning that elevated sectarian tension in the Eastern Province following the execution of Shi'a cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr in January has been aggravated by the Islamic State's targeting of Shi'a in the region in a bid to provoke and take advantage of Sunni-Shi'a strife. Scotland appears not to face as severe a challenge from violent Islamist extremism as some other Western countries. Stefano Bonino examines the reasons for Scottish exceptionalism, including an 'inclusive' Canada-like body politic, but also draws attention to its limits. Finally, Mokhtar Awad follows up on an article he co-authored in the August 2015 issue of *CTC Sentinel* to examine how the Islamic State threat to Cairo and mainland Egypt has evolved. He argues that despite a sometimes faltering and amateurish campaign and hostility from pro-al-Qa'ida factions, there is a real possibility the Islamic State could consolidate its position in the Nile Valley.

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Cover: A Peshmerga fighter next to the remains of a car reportedly belonging to the Islamic State, north of Mosul, Iraq GETTY

A Caliphate under Strain: The Documentary Evidence

By Aymenn al-Tamimi

Internal Islamic State documents, including documents obtained by the author and published here for the first time, shed new light on how the Islamic State has come under strain as it is degraded by coalition air strikes and loses territory. The internal records make clear these pressures have been felt in the group's military, financial, and administrative domains, forcing it to take measures to react and adapt. But while the so-called Caliphate has come under pressure, there is little prospect of any collapse anytime soon. Populations under Islamic State rule are accustomed to poor living standards, exacerbated by years of civil war, and will likely stomach further decreases in quality of life for the time being rather than rebel and risk a brutal crackdown.

In assessing the success of the strategies of the U.S.-led international coalition against the Islamic State, a crucial question is how the Islamic State's statehood project is functioning on the ground in Iraq and Syria. Does it operate successfully as a self-proclaimed state that can endure? Or are there signs that the Islamic State is facing increasing internal challenges over time that may pose a risk of collapse from within? One may also posit that the reality lies somewhere between these two alternatives. The stakes are high. Since the Islamic State, unlike al-Qa`ida and its various regional affiliates, places such great emphasis on its image as state, the collapse of the project in Iraq and Syria may put the Islamic State's entire future as an international movement into doubt.

The approach of this paper is to rely not only on broader open-source data and collected testimony but also hundreds of internal Islamic State documents that have been compiled by this author over time. Many of these internal documents were first collected from the realms of social media, posted by sources of a variety of orientations both pro- and anti-Islamic State, such as personal accounts run by Islamic State members and supporters within the entity's territories, as well as media activist pages dedicated to coverage of a particular area under Islamic State control. Over time though, it appears that the Islamic State itself has sought to restrict the dissemination of unauthorized information, aiming

to ensure that as much of the information as possible that is broadcasted within its territories and to the outside world comes solely through its official channels.¹ Meanwhile, Islamic State crackdowns on perceived spies and unauthorized media activity may deter or prevent activist groups from obtaining documents. In these circumstances, this author has also sought to obtain internal documents from connections established through prior travel to northern Syria.

Some documents discussed in this paper are being published here for the first time and are attached at the end of this article.^a Though the available documents can offer some very valuable insights into the internal workings of the Islamic State, it must be recognized that they cannot be thought to represent anything close to the majority of documents in circulation within Islamic State territory. It will therefore be up to the future liberators of remaining Islamic State territories—particularly key strongholds such as Mosul and Raqqa—to capture and archive documents for subsequent research, to gain a fuller understanding of Islamic State development over time.

Looking at the available evidence, three key internal challenges facing the Islamic State concern its military power, financial resources, and administrative competence. Of course, these problems do not exist in isolation but rather are interlinked. Once these challenges are examined, one must then ask what they mean for the future viability of the Islamic State's statehood project.

Military Pressures

Looking at the broad military picture, it should be clear that the era of major, rapid advances for the Islamic State within Iraq and Syria has come to an end. The last series of significant gains for the Islamic State came in May 2015. That was when the Islamic State captured the Anbar provincial capital of Ramadi, which involved

a The travels in northern Syria involved a visit to the Azaz area in north Aleppo countryside in December 2014. Considering the area's strategic importance on the border with Turkey and its current status as a de facto safe zone despite being a frontline region in the fight against the Islamic State, Azaz has served as a useful hub for establishing connections inside and outside of Islamic State territory to obtain documents. In addition, the author has a contact in Hasakah province who has helped find documents left behind by the Islamic State as it has lost ground to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition. Though it is not possible to verify the exclusive documents featured in this paper by sending them to Islamic State members and officials to check their authenticity, the documents bear Islamic State stamps, formats and language use consistent with prior observed specimens, and there are no reasonable grounds to dismiss them as spurious. In contrast, known forgeries are poorly crafted and can be readily identified according to political motives on the part of the forgers. For instance, a recurring forgery motif in Iraq features Islamic State orders for a scorched earth policy and the committing of atrocities in order for Iraqi forces to be accused of war crimes. See Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Guide to Islamic State Document Hoaxes," Jihad Intel, December 24, 2015.

a mobilization within the Syrian holdings of the Islamic State to reinforce the fronts in Anbar and Salah al-Din provinces in Iraq, and a lightning advance through the Homs desert that saw the Islamic State take Sukhna and Palmyra from the Assad regime, in addition to a further push westward in north Aleppo countryside toward the important border town of Azaz, which once constituted an “emirate” back when the Islamic State called itself the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).²

Even so, already around the spring of 2015, a sober assessment would have regarded the military situation for the Islamic State as one of stalemate; the Islamic State had lost all strongholds in the Iraqi provinces of Diyala and Babil as well as the town of Tikrit and had suffered considerable casualties in the failed campaign to take the Kurdish-held border town of Kobani in Syria. The last development in particular meant that the YPG forces and its rebel auxiliary allies were able to advance with considerable ease toward the key border town of Tel Abyad in Raqqa province, which fell out of Islamic State hands in mid-June 2015. Subsequently, the Islamic State has lost control of the industrial town of Baiji to the north of Tikrit, Ramadi, and Kubaysa in Anbar; the town of Sinjar in Ninawa province that constituted an important point in the most conventional Raqqa-Mosul route; the town of al-Shaddadi in Hasakah province; and Palmyra. While elsewhere it is true that the Islamic State still makes a gain at the local level from time to time, such as cutting off the Assad regime’s supply route to Aleppo via the town of Khanaser,³ these Islamic State initiatives are usually reversed within a short period of time.⁴ Between January 2015 and mid-March 2016, IHS Jane’s estimated that the Islamic State had lost 22 percent of its territory holdings in Syria and Iraq.⁵

Thus, one cannot doubt that militarily, the overall trends have now gone against the Islamic State for almost a year. Despite the motto of remaining and expanding, an audio message⁶ released by Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in late December 2015 seemed to acknowledge the hardships the Islamic State was facing on account of the numerous forces arrayed against it. He predicted an increase in “seditions” and “tragedies” but asserted that this situation is that of “the victorious sect in every era.” Even so, the desire to show an appearance of constant momentum is clear. To this end, the group’s latest major initiative has involved the opening up of a front against rebels in the southern Syrian province of Deraa via a linked group known as Liwa Shuhada’ al-Yarmouk. LSY was recently reorganized under the leadership of a Saudi emir dispatched by the Islamic State even as it officially denies any Islamic State connection.⁷ Initial gains for LSY, cooperating with another jihadist group called Harakat al-Muthanna al-Islamiya (HMI), seemed impressive with the capture of the localities of Tasil and Sahm al-Jowlan, while HMI took control of Sheikh Sa’ad, Adwan, and Jalin. But these advances have all been reversed⁸ as more rebel forces have become involved in the fight.⁹ Previous frontlines against LSY were mostly maintained by the southern Jaysh al-Fatah led by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham.¹⁰

In the context of territorial losses, it is noteworthy that the Islamic State has tried to prevent and/or reverse enemy advances on multiple occasions through mobilization calls. These mobilization calls, which appear in the form of internal documents, have largely failed. Examples include a bid to stop the Assad regime, Iranian proxy militias, and Russian airpower from breaking the Islamic State’s long-standing siege of Kweiris airbase to the east of Aleppo city;¹¹ a mobilization call in southern Hasakah following the loss of

“Some internal documents point to reductions in ‘perks’ in recent months. The clearest example was a salary cut of 50 percent for all fighters announced in a Raqqa province document issued sometime in November-December 2015.”

al-Shaddadi;¹² and a mobilization call to stop the fall of Palmyra.^b These mobilization attempts suggest the Islamic State is experiencing manpower problems. This was reflected on a wider level when the Islamic State issued a general amnesty for deserters at the beginning of October 2015.¹³ The personnel shortages were also evidenced by an Islamic State document that emerged last year. Issued in Deir ez-Zor province in eastern Syria, the document indicates that a number of Islamic State members had been seeking false medical reports from doctors in order to avoid frontline duty.¹⁴

Likely factors behind these manpower problems include high attrition rates in fights that ultimately yielded no success like Kobani and Baiji,¹⁵ a reduction in the foreign fighter flow through the loss of major border areas like Tel Abyad and tougher Turkish policies to prevent fighter influx, and reductions in benefits for Islamic State fighters, the last of which is linked to financial problems facing the group.

Financial Pressures

Although the Islamic State conveys in its propaganda the impression of a comprehensive, functioning state model, which might be reinforced by a superficial overview of the range of internal documents uncovered, one should not forget that the evidence points to the bulk of the Islamic State’s financial resources going toward military upkeep, primarily in the form of providing fighters’ salaries and benefits as well as maintaining bases. Using calculations from a sample budget from Deir ez-Zor province obtained and published by this author¹⁶ and other reporting,¹⁷ it can be estimated that roughly two-thirds of Islamic State expenditure has gone toward military upkeep.

Logically, therefore, one could surmise that the most effective way to reduce costs amid financial crisis would be to cut back on salaries and benefits for fighters, though it should be noted that economic conditions for Islamic State fighters are not the same everywhere. For example, circumstances are much better in the north of Syria as opposed to the south. Here it should be noted there is still a degree of uncertainty as to the exact scales of salaries among Islamic State members and fighters, and how they may vary, if at all, by rank and region. While claims have routinely circulated of basic wages of \$400 a month for local fighters¹⁸ and \$800 a month for foreigners,¹⁹ the only reliable evidence so far comes from docu-

b The existence of this mobilization call was ascertained by the author from a refugee from Palmyra who had fled to the Azaz area in the north Aleppo countryside and had a copy of the document, though the person refused to hand it over/allow it to be photographed.

ments pointing to a scheme of a basic wage of \$50 a month, with an additional \$50 for each wife, \$35 for each child, \$50 for each sex slave, \$35 for each child of a sex slave, \$50 for each dependent parent, and \$35 each for other dependents (see Item A).^{20c} There may also be other salary additions such as a daily food allowance, heating costs and bonuses for performing certain duties.

Some internal documents point to reductions in “perks” in recent months. The clearest example was a salary cut of 50 percent announced for all fighters in a Raqqa province document issued sometime in November-December 2015, pointing to the “exceptional circumstances” the Islamic State was going through as the justification.^d In addition, a document (Item B) captured from the Islamic State in north Aleppo countryside, dated to September 2015 and signed by the deputy *wali* of Aleppo [Islamic State provincial governor] notifies the local emirs of a directive (no. 86) from the General Governing Committee,^e which affirms that:

In view of the brothers’ use of transport and vehicles belonging to the Dawla outside of operation times, which is causing an unjustified waste in the Bayt Mal al-Muslimeen [financial treasury], reaching the point of forbidden excess, it has therefore been decided to direct all brothers not to use vehicles affiliated with the Dawla in case of personal needs except by permission from one’s emir; and in the event of contravention, an inquiry will be held—by God’s permission—with those who infringe on the regulation...”²¹

In a similar vein, pointing to problems of electricity maintenance, a notification issued in the following month by the *wali* of Aleppo refers to another directive (Item C) from the General Governing Committee, with the decision:

“to cut the service line of 24/24 electricity from all the houses of the mujahideen brothers in the wilaya and preserving it for the bases only, and that is in accordance with the regulations with the public services centre on account of the effect on the main transformers and realizing fairness between the soldiers of the Islamic State and the subjects of the Amir al-Mu’mineen, may God protect and cultivate him.”²²

Besides cost-cutting measures, financial strain is also suggested by the Islamic State’s devising of new methods for generating income. For example, when the Islamic State initially took over Mosul in June 2014, fees for repentance were imposed on former army and

police personnel. In September 2015, new repentance fees were introduced for those who had worked in the electoral commission.²³ Around the same time, students wishing to attend schools under the auspices of the Islamic State Diwan al-Ta’aleem were required to pay the costs for any printing of textbooks that had been issued as part of the new curriculum to begin in academic year 2015-2016.²⁴

More recently, another barometer of the financial strain on the Islamic State is that with the diminishing value of the Syrian pound,²⁵ the circulation of the U.S. dollar has become ever more important. The manipulation of currency exchange rates has become another way the Islamic State generates income.²⁶ Despite all the Islamic State propaganda about its new “gold dinar” currency, there is no evidence that this monetary unit is in real circulation.

The reasons for financial strain on the Islamic State overlap to a degree with the causes of problems of cohesion in the Islamic State’s ranks, such as reduced border access to Turkey, tougher border policies, and coalition airstrikes. These strikes have most recently targeted Islamic State “cash storage” points²⁷ and the oil industry.^f In addition, since around August 2015, the Iraqi government has ceased to pay salaries of government workers living inside Islamic State territory on the grounds that the Islamic State was using these payments to generate income via taxation.²⁸ The Iraqi government’s suspicion appears to be confirmed by an Islamic State document from Anbar that recognizes the importance of delivery of Iraqi government-paid salaries. The document, dated July 2015, orders the removal of a confiscation order on the house of a certain Naf’ Hussein Ali, on the grounds that he is “cooperative in assisting and facilitating the delivery of salaries of those affiliated with the education administration in the wilaya.”²⁹ Finally, one may also tie financial strain to the lack of significant territorial gains for some time, as the lack of acquisition means fewer opportunities to generate income through confiscations—a strategy that seems to play an important role in Islamic State financing, based on the aforementioned leaked financial accounts from Deir ez-Zor province.

Deficiencies in Administration

Despite the image of a comprehensive bureaucracy, questions exist as to the true level of competence in governing. It would appear that a particular problem for the Islamic State has been brain-drain, especially in the realm of medicine and health. Indeed, on multiple occasions, the Islamic State has issued ultimatums for medical staff at Mosul University and medical professionals more widely who have fled: if they do not return, then their property will be confiscated.³⁰ Even so, these ultimatums do not seem to have stopped outflow of medical professionals. For example, a document (Item D) from January 2016 obtained from a pharmacist who fled from Mosul to the rebel-held area of Azaz in north Aleppo countryside shows that many doctors and pharmacists have been clearing out their clinics and shops by selling medicine and equipment to customers outside the Islamic State *wilaya* of Ninawa in order to raise money to flee Islamic State territory and minimize Islamic State confiscation of material upon fleeing. All of this has reduced poten-

c Over the course of February-April 2016, the author also spoke with three members of the Islamic State-linked LSY on the subject of salaries, all of whom affirmed an identical scheme of \$50 per month as a basic starting salary with an additional \$50 if one has a wife and \$35 for each child. In terms of further specifics, one clarified that the additional \$35 per child does not apply for the male child who is over 15 years of age and able to carry a weapon. Another said that if one performs *ribat* [frontline duty] and is not married, there can be bonuses. The third interviewee said that there is no difference in salary scheme between an emir and an ordinary member.

d One should be careful about extrapolating from this document. Economic circumstances are not the same for all Islamic State fighters everywhere, and it may be that in Raqqa province in particular the fighters constitute a particularly heavy financial burden, leading to the reduction in payments after tallying the various requirements. Conversely, one of the LSY members said he had not heard of a salary reduction. Al-Tamimi, “Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents (cont.),” Specimen 12Q.

e The General Governing Committee has the authority to issue general directives to Islamic State *wilayas* [provinces] and government departments [*diwans*].

f The oil fields themselves are controlled by the Islamic State and any investment in them requires allegiance to the Islamic State Caliph, whereas no such allegiance is required for someone to purchase oil from these fields and then refine or sell the oil inside or outside of Islamic State territory. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State: Full text and translation,” *Guardian*, December 7, 2015.

tial revenue for the group.³¹

In part, problems of medical brain-drain derive from the nature of Islamic State restrictions, such as the prohibition against dealings with pharmacies outside Islamic State territory, a ban on importing Iranian medical goods, the requirement to obtain licensing from the Islamic State's health department (the Diwan al-Siha), and an insistence on gender segregation in the treatment of women's health issues except out of absolute necessity and despite a shortage of female doctors.³² Furthermore, a notification from the deputy *wali* of Aleppo in September 2015 (Item E) draws attention to directive no. 86 from the General Governing Committee, highlighting the observation of a "number of instances of unjustified and illegitimate attacks by some of the soldiers of the Dawla on members of the citizenry, and their arrogance against them in the name of the Dawla, especially those among them working in the public interests like doctors and pharmacists, as well as those working in the realm of services like electricity and water employees and others besides them."³³ This fits in with the widespread perception of Islamic State fighters as a privileged class, many of whom (particularly the foreigners) treat the wider populace with contempt,³⁴ which likely contributes to the brain-drain.

Other Islamic State documents obtained by this author point to shortcomings in agriculture and water usage. In June 2015, a general notification was issued by the agricultural department calling for the creation and conservation of reserve grain stocks on account of the "economic war" being waged by the coalition against the Islamic State.³⁵ Further, directive no. 103 from the General Governing Committee in October 2015 (Item F) points to "the existence of a deficiency in the agricultural cadres in the [agricultural] centers, and the [Agriculture] Diwan's urgent need for the Diwan to be technocratic, as a service to the public interest."³⁶ Finally, in relation to water, the anti-Islamic State activist group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently recently publicized a document from Raqqa in the name of the Services Department (Diwan al-Khidamat) calling for water to be cut off one day every three days as part of implementing a water conservation culture.³⁷

Remaining and Contracting

The evidence surveyed above indicates that there are significant internal challenges facing the Islamic State's statehood project, which prompts a larger question of whether these challenges might lead to a collapse of the Islamic State from within. The author's estimation is that such a prospect remains unlikely for the foreseeable future. On a more general level, the local populations in Iraq and Syria under Islamic State rule are accustomed to poor living standards, exacerbated by years of civil war, and can show resilience even with a decrease in quality of life as the Islamic State faces internal challenges. More specifically, one needs to avoid overstating and sensationalizing the scale of the internal challenges. For example, considering finances, it is certainly true that the Islamic State is experiencing diminishing returns in taxation (e.g. with the loss of Iraqi government-paid salaries for workers), confiscation opportunities, and oil revenues (although the petroleum industry's financial

value has always been somewhat overstated in reporting^g), but the group would be unlikely to reach a fatal tipping point unless access to the outside world were completely shut off. Even if access to the Turkish border ceased entirely, such a goal is impossible to achieve in reality.

This is because despite the fact that the Islamic State is officially at war with all of its neighbors, pragmatism in the war zone environment means that there is still a flow of people and goods and, therefore, cash in and out of Islamic State territory. For example, a document dated March 2016 obtained by this author (Item G) outlines how a driver from the Azaz area has been taking passengers into Islamic State-held territory via a crossing in the village of Dabiq.³⁸ Generally speaking, those living in Islamic State territory must obtain a permit from the Diwan al-Hisba in whatever *wilaya* they live in if they wish to travel outside Islamic State territory for a limited period of time.³⁹ But Syrians in particular who live outside Islamic State territory and wish to visit for business purposes in particular can come to Islamic State areas on a temporary basis without any real Islamic State bureaucratic hindrance, a prospect that is also made attractive by a relatively decent "security" environment to do business as compared to the more chaotic and dangerous rebel-held areas.

When it comes to commerce, directive no. 102 from the General Governing Committee from October 2015, obtained by the author (Item H), permits the export of "all agricultural and grain products except wheat, and the facilitating of their passing through the entry points of the Islamic State to the outside in order to encourage producers and make markets inclined to their production."⁴⁰ This signals a clear desire by the Islamic State leadership to generate cash flow and revenue through expansion of its agriculture market with the outside world.

On a wider level, failings in administration do not necessarily point to prospects of a successful internal revolt. The internal security apparatus of the Islamic State—embodied in its Diwan al-Amn—has proven efficient in tracking down and killing those deemed to be spies, and open revolt, as exemplified in the Sha'itat tribal uprising in Deir ez-Zor province back in the summer of 2014, has been ruthlessly crushed.⁴¹ In Libya, as the Islamic State is developing administration in the Sirte area on the model of Islamic State bureaucracy in Iraq and Syria (from which some senior personnel have been dispatched to Libya^h), there has been similar success in suppressing internal rebellion. In contrast, the "Distant Provinces Administration" of the Islamic State has had difficulty managing

^g For example, see Erika Solomon, Guy Chazan, and Sam Jones, "ISIS Inc: How oil fuels the jihadi terrorists," *Financial Times*, October 14, 2015. The report estimates a daily revenue of \$1.5 million from oil based on ranges given for number of barrels of oil produced per day (34,000-40,000) and price per barrel (\$20-45). However, no documentary evidence is given to support these statistics. Documents that do exist with respect to this field put the price per barrel estimate into doubt. These documents show oil sold per barrel at prices well below \$20. See, for instance, al-Tamimi, "Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents," Specimens 5T and 5U, as well as al-Tamimi, "Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents (cont.)" Specimens 13Z, 14A, and 14B.

^h The most senior known case is that of Abu al-Mughira al-Qahtani, who was killed in an airstrike in November 2015.

internal dissent within the Yemeni affiliates of the Islamic State, which have struggled to compete with al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula and its front group Ansar al-Sharia.

Militarily, there still remains some way to go before one can reasonably speak of a prospect of the defeat of the Islamic State. In considerable part, this is because of weakness and division among the Islamic State's enemies outweighs the group's own military deficiencies. For example, a key goal of the coalition in the more immediate term must be to expel the Islamic State from the remaining border areas with Turkey in north Aleppo countryside, and the main ground partners in this regard are either the Hawar-Kilis operations room backed with Turkish support and composed of a number of local Syrian rebel groups to the west of Islamic State holdingsⁱ or the Kurdish YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) currently based around the Tishreen Dam to the southeast of the Islamic State stronghold of Manbij in eastern Aleppo.

A notable dilemma exists here. On the one hand, further acquisitions by the SDF along the border with Turkey are unacceptable in Ankara's eyes, and the SDF's ambitions of linking the Afrin canton to the west of Azaz with the Kobani and Jazira cantons entail removing the remaining rebel presence in north Aleppo countryside. On the other hand, it seems doubtful that the Hawar-Kilis operations room, like the Marea operations room^k that preceded it,

can control the entire remaining border area. Though it achieved a celebrated milestone in expelling the Islamic State from the border locality of al-Ra'i,⁴² the Islamic State quickly launched a counteroffensive and regained al-Ra'i and a number of other villages, reverting the situation back to a stalemate. Assuming the Hawar-Kilis operations room and SDF based around Tishreen Dam come into territorial contact, there will likely be conflict between the two sides, something that the Islamic State may exploit to regain ground. The regime may also attempt to move beyond Kweiris airbase and seize Islamic State-held Aleppo province strongholds like al-Bab, Deir Hafer, and Maskanah, potentially opening an active front against the Hawar-Kilis operations room at some point.

Besides these problems facing the coalition in north Aleppo countryside, serious questions remain over retaking the two key Islamic State strongholds of Raqqa and Mosul, which can be viewed as the *de facto* Syrian and Iraqi capitals of the Islamic State, respectively. Here, one can only logically expect much more vigorous Islamic State defenses against potential assaults, likely involving the elite Jaysh al-Khilafa/Jaysh Dabiq, which has already taken on a role of entrenching the defenses around Raqqa in the wake of the loss of Tel Abyad and much of the northern Raqqa countryside.⁴³

Moreover, in the case of Raqqa in particular, there are no viable ground partners to retake the city. The main candidate for consideration so far has been Liwa Thuwar al-Raqqa (The Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade) based in the northern Raqqa locality of Ayn Issa, but it is of questionable military effectiveness, remains dependent on the YPG for survival,¹ and recently had to dissolve its tribal army project dedicated to fighting the Islamic State.⁴⁴ Otherwise, the only other potential contender for Raqqa may well be the Assad regime, depending on how it assesses its future moves in tandem with Russia following the retaking of Palmyra.

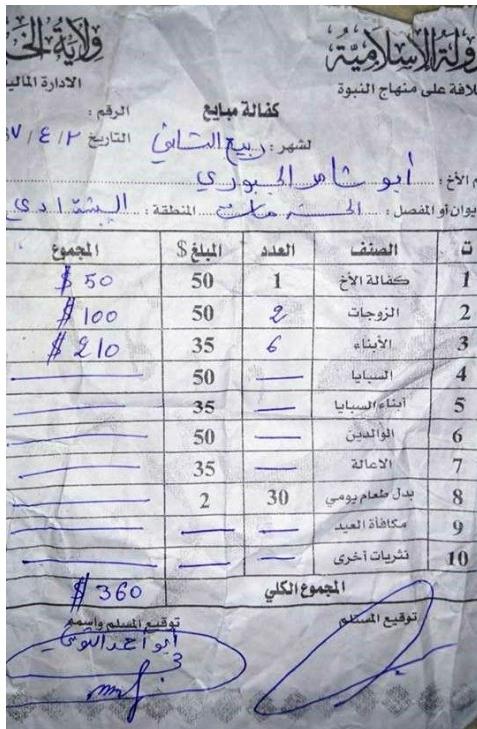
In short, the documentary evidence confirms the current coalition approach has brought about significant losses for the Islamic State and put it under pressure on multiple fronts, but any predictions of the Islamic State's collapse are premature. **CTC**

ⁱ The affair was publicized in a series of documents leaked by AQAP supporters over the course of December 2015–February 2016, highlighting protestations by a number of officials and fighters against the conduct of the overall *wali* of Yemen appointed by al-Baghdadi. However, the central leadership rejected the complaints and ordered the protestors to operate under the *wali*'s leadership. When this order was rejected despite the dissenters' affirmation of continuing allegiance to the Islamic State, the Distant Provinces Administration issued a notice ordering the expulsion of perceived ringleaders and those who wished to continue in their dissent. While it is not possible to tell how many exactly persisted in their dissent and how many returned to the fold, it is clear the affair has hindered the Islamic State's ability to compete with AQAP. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Dissent in the Islamic State's Yemen Affiliates: Documents, Translation & Analysis," aymennjawad.org, February 29, 2016; Asa Fitch and Saleh al-Batati, "ISIS Fails to Gain Much Traction in Yemen," *Wall Street Journal*, March 28, 2016.

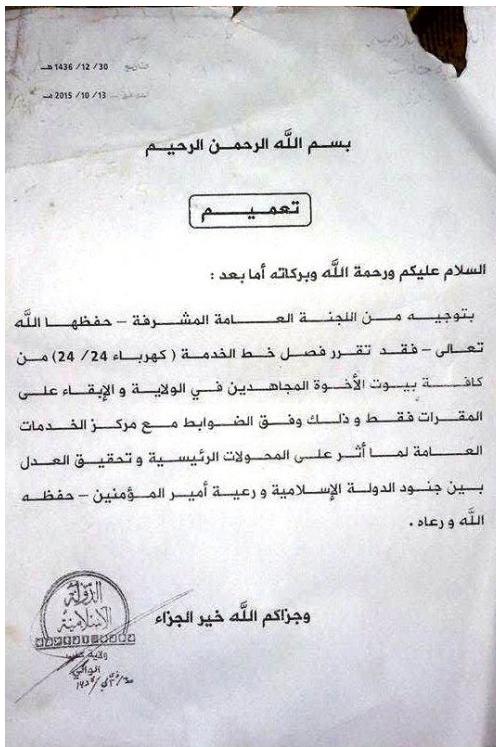
^j Hawar-Kilis is a village on the border with Turkey to the east of Azaz. The main factions involved in the operations room are Faylaq al-Sham, Liwa al-Hamza, Liwa al-Mu'atasim, Division 99, Division 51, and Sultan Murad. Personal interview, media activist based in Azaz, March 2015.

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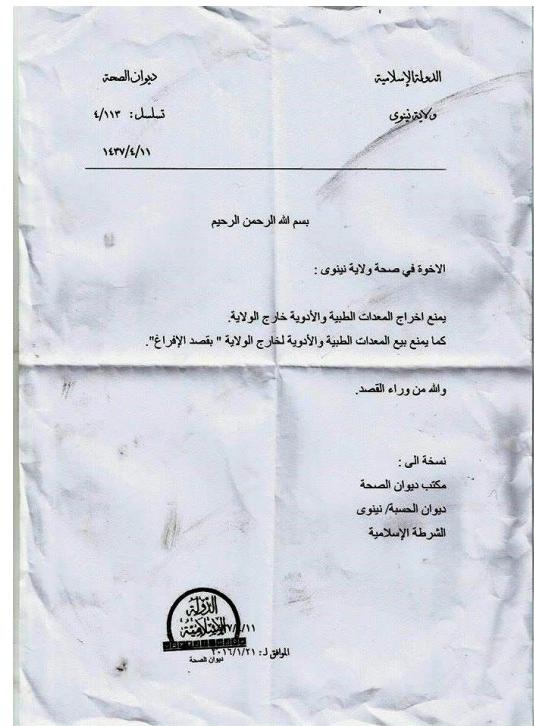
Item A: Salary scheme of \$360 per month for an Islamic State member with two wives and six children in Wilayat al-Baraka (Hasakah province). Date on document: 3 Rabi' al-Thani 1436 AH (c. January 13-14, 2016 CE). It was part of a cache of documents left behind in al-Shaddad in Hasakah province after the Islamic State lost control of the area to the Syrian Democratic Force (SDF). It was provided to the author by a Syrian Kurdish journalist who visited al-Shaddadi in February-March 2016.



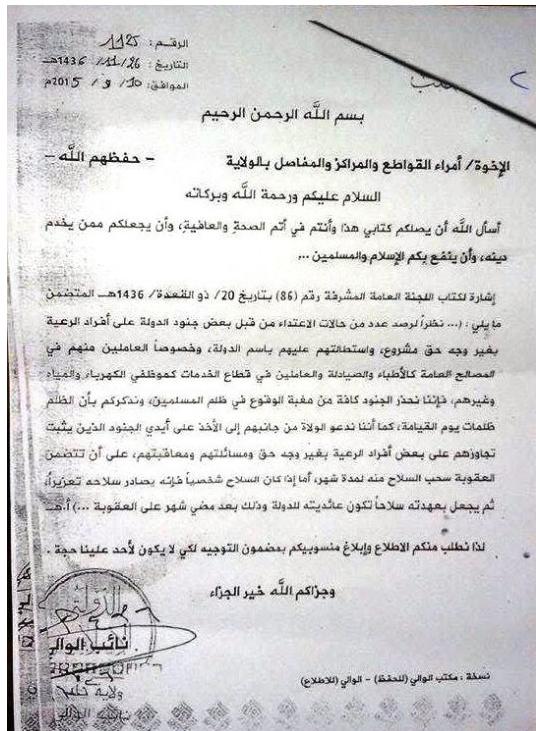
Item C: Reduction in electricity access for fighters' homes. Date on document: 30 Dhu al-Hijja 1436 AH (October 13, 2015 CE). Obtained from same source and same location as Item B.



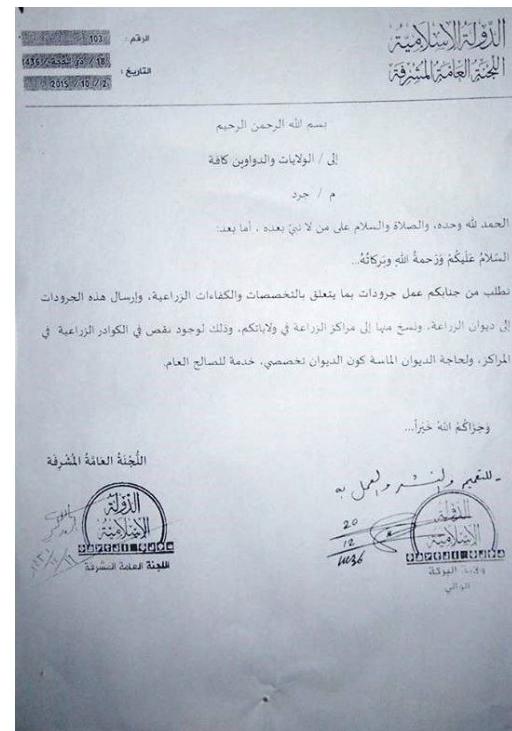
Item B: Preventing unnecessary use of Islamic State vehicles outside of operation hours. Date on document: 26 Dhu al-Qi'da 1436 AH (September 10, 2015 CE). It was obtained in November 2015 from the north Aleppo village of Delha after the Islamic State lost control of it to Syrian rebels. The document was provided to the author by a media activist working with the rebel forces fighting the Islamic State in north Aleppo.



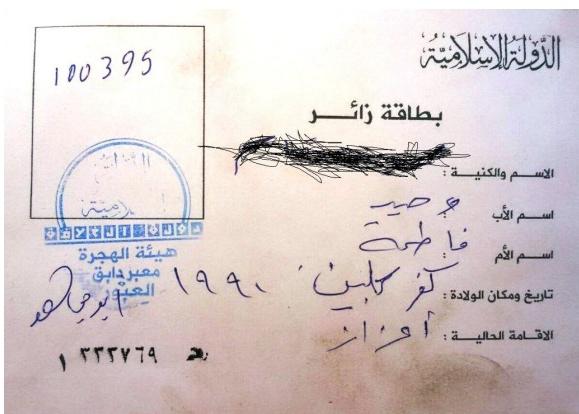
Item D: Prohibition on removal and sale of medicine and medical equipment outside of the wilaya. Date on document: 11 Rabi' al-Thani 1437 AH (January 21, 2016 CE). The document was provided to the author in March 2016 by a pharmacist who fled Mosul and reached the Azaz area in north Aleppo countryside on the border with Turkey.



Item E: Observation by General Governing Committee on misconduct by fighters. Date on document: 26 Dhu al-Qi'da 1436 AH (September 10, 2015 CE). Obtained in November 2015 from the north Aleppo village of Delha after the Islamic State lost control of it to Syrian rebels. The document was provided to the author by a media activist working with the rebel forces fighting Islamic State in north Aleppo.



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Item G: Visitor's pass for driver from Azaz area through crossing at Dabiq (name redacted to protect driver's identity). Date on document: 29 Jumada al-Awal 1437 AH (March 9, 2016 CE). Obtained by the author in March 2016 from a contact in Azaz who knows the driver.



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A View from the CT Foxhole: The Honorable Juan C. Zarate, former Deputy National Security Advisor for Combating Terrorism

By Bryan Price

The Honorable Juan C. Zarate served as Deputy Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor for Combating Terrorism from 2005 to 2009. He was responsible for developing and implementing the U.S. government's counterterrorism strategy and policies related to transnational security threats. Mr. Zarate was the first-ever Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes. He is the chairman and co-founder of the Financial Integrity Network, the senior national security analyst for CBS News, and a visiting lecturer of law at the Harvard Law School. Mr. Zarate is the CTC's Class of 1971 Senior Fellow.

CTC: This month you testified in front of the Senate Homeland Security Committee about the terrorist threat in Europe and its effect on the threat to the U.S. homeland. What can we learn from your testimony?

Zarate: The attacks in Brussels, like those in Paris in November 2015, were shocking but not surprising. The concern that ISIS or al-Qa`ida would leverage foreign fighters and embed them back into Western societies has now come to pass. Europe suffers from a serious counterterrorism problem, stemming from fundamental, interrelated problems.

ISIS has trained and deployed Europeans back into Europe to perpetrate sophisticated attacks, and authorities are playing catch-up, with an unclear sense of the expanse of the terrorist networks. Many of the transnational networks that have long served violent extremist causes, to include prison and criminal networks, have been coopted or repurposed by ISIS for their European strategy. Embedded recruitment pipelines, often led by charismatic clerics, have supplied hundreds of recruits. Terrorist networks unearthed or involved in recent attacks have tended to have a common ideological and operational lineage with ties back to known radical elements and operatives.

Francophone cells—comprised of French, Belgian, and dual nationals—have proven a lethal network for ISIS attack plotting in Europe. These Western operatives have been trained to evade scrutiny, engage in operational security, including the use of encryption technologies, and execute strategic attacks in concert. The sheer volume of potential operatives, along with unknown actors, has overwhelmed even the best European services.

The views expressed here are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

This is exacerbated by intelligence blind spots and a lack of real-time information-sharing within Europe, a clear mismatch of capabilities, a failure of security forces to cooperate across borders, and a reactive security paradigm.

And of course, a serious, long-term challenge for European authorities lies in the deep pockets of radicalization embedded in particular communities and neighborhoods. Such neighborhoods have served as breeding grounds and micro safe havens for violent Islamic extremists, ideologues, and recruitment. Factors such as economic and social isolation of immigrant communities and failed integration policies, along with festering questions of individual identity, loyalty, and alienation, have fueled these hot spots of radicalization.

The problem of disaffected communities and marginalized individuals will only be exacerbated with new refugees flowing into Europe, and the difficulty of their economic and social integration across Europe, and the potential for the fueling of right-wing reactionary forces. The refugee crisis offers ISIS strategic advantages of using the flows to infiltrate operatives back into Europe, increasing destabilizing pressure on Europe's economies and structures at time of social and institutional fragility, and the potential of future radicalized refugees if they can be recruited and are not well integrated or insulated from such radical forces.

All of this impacts U.S. security directly. Concerns over the visa waiver program are real, and the demonstration effect of successful terrorist attacks in the West can motivate radicalized individuals to attack. The growing sophistication of the networks in Europe reflects a graduation of capabilities, with operatives able to execute strategic attacks under the noses of European authorities focused on preventing such attacks. These adaptations are likely to continue, and those could ultimately be reflected in the United States, with terrorists sharing methodologies.

Ultimately, the United States needs a strong Europe to be an active partner in counter-terrorism across the board. We are at war together.

CTC: In your book *Treasury's War*, you were part of a team in the Treasury Department that revolutionized how the United States went after al-Qa`ida and other terrorists financially after 9/11. Today we are using many of those same tools, but the Islamic State appears to have a much more diversified financial portfolio from which to support itself. Are our financial tools therefore less effective against the Islamic State?

Zarate: The U.S. government has become very good at using financial power, economic influence, and Treasury tools to isolate and unplug America's enemies from the global financial and commercial system—ultimately, making it harder, costlier, and riskier for them to raise and move money around the world. This playbook is still effective, but it needs to be continuously refined to account for the adaptations of the enemy.

Terrorists groups have grown more independent and innovative in developing self-funding mechanisms while individual members and cells use local means to raise necessary funds. ISIS runs a war economy, with a diversified portfolio providing them income. Their ability to control significant territory, with populations to tax and resources to exploit, has allowed them to govern and expand their operations. Revenue from running oil operations in Iraq and Syria has been a major source of revenue for the group—as it has taken advantage of the black market in oil and old Iraqi oil smuggling routes and as it has developed mobile refineries and transport to transact with brokers, including even the Assad regime in Syria.

We've had to accelerate our understanding of how ISIS is doing business and moving money within its territory and beyond. We can certainly squeeze key chokepoints for the ISIS economy where it touches the regional and global financial system, including by isolating the financial institutions that sit in ISIS-controlled territory. Ultimately though, we have had to recognize that a major enabling factor for financing is ISIS control of territory and real resources—and that we have to dislodge the group physically. There is no magic button at Treasury that allows us to do this.

This is why economic disruption is a key element of the war plan against ISIS. The U.S. and coalition airstrikes—including on cash distribution centers—and pressure on the ground have dislodged the Islamic State from some of its oil infrastructure and put real pressure on its economy.

CTC: What is our biggest constraint in going after the Islamic State financially? What could or should we be doing in the financial realm that we are currently not doing? What are we doing that is working well that we should double-down on?

Zarate: The constraints on our financial gameplan have been two-fold: a lack of good information about the specifics of the ISIS economy and its continued control of territory that allows them access to populations and resources, like oil, antiquities, and granaries. There is also the problem that ISIS—in occupying major urban centers—has created economic defensive shields, understanding that we are not going to bomb all the banks in Mosul or starve the economy of millions of people. There are material constraints to what we can do while ISIS controls real territory and populations.

We don't need more legislation, but we do need better intelligence, strong partners on the ground, and sustained political will and attention to disrupt ISIS financing, to include the physical disruption of its hold on territory. We also need to work closely with our allies and the private sector to determine how effectively to isolate terrorist economies. Treasury has been doing a good job of attacking this problem with its authorities and relationships. Financial intelligence, tools and suasion, enforcement, and financial diplomacy can all be used aggressively to attack terrorist and illicit financing as it hits key chokepoints and the financial system.

CTC: You are part of a special CSIS Commission on Countering Violent Extremism that is co-chaired by Tony Blair and Leon Panetta and strategically timed to influence policy in the next administration. Where do we need to go with CVE moving forward? What models have been successful, and what obstacles stand in our way to do better in this domain?

Zarate: The purpose of the CSIS CVE Commission is to provide the new administration and allies around the world with recommendations on how to address the long-term challenges and threats

"We are losing the broader 'battle of ideas' against a violent extremist ideology. But this is a long-term battle, and we have assets, allies, and ideas on our side."

of violent extremism and ideologies animating ISIS and others movements. We are losing the broader “battle of ideas” against a violent extremist ideology that is infecting a whole new generation of Muslim millennials and defining what it means to be Muslim in the 21st century.

But this is a long-term battle, and we have assets, allies, and ideas on our side. The vast majority of Muslims are not drawn to the ideology, and Muslim voices and activists are speaking against extremism. This is precisely why ISIS has targeted some of them openly and why voices of moderation have come under direct attack in places like Bangladesh. Mothers and victims of terrorists have organized chapters and spoken out against radicalizers. Former extremists have organized to counter recruitment and the ideology on the streets, in campuses, and online. Muslim youth, imams, and entrepreneurs have developed on-line platforms to organize against extremism.

Attempts to amplify these and other credible voices and create new platforms for expression and a sense of modern identity not dictated by terrorists have worked on a small scale. All of these efforts must be scaled up dramatically. Networking, empowering, funding, and enlisting credible voices are critical, and this has to be done not just by governments but also by civil society, NGOs, and philanthropists.

Governments need to provide consistent strategic focus, funding, and a willingness to let a thousand flowers bloom. This includes seeding investments in this space—like a “CVE In-Q-Tel”—to allow for investment in innovation to counter the messaging and manifestations of extremism. And then we need to scale those projects and networks that have proven successful with real effects.

CTC: Many argue that the United States and the West in general are at an obvious disadvantage in influencing Muslim hearts and minds. What role should the U.S. government play here? How can our government empower private sector entities, NGOs, and Muslim communities to take the lead in this fight in the United States and around the world?

Zarate: Through two administrations, the United States has struggled to counter this ideology. The U.S. government is neither expert nor credible in confronting an ideology grounded in interpretations of Islam. Yet we cannot abdicate taking the ideological fight to the enemy nor hope that these groups will alienate themselves into extinction with their brutality. And we cannot simply assume that our allies—especially in Muslim communities—can defend against the threat of terror and the allure of the ideology on their own.

America must lead—empowering, enabling, and defending networks, communities, and individuals willing to confront the ideology. This includes not just counter-messaging but confronting directly the outbreaks and manifestations of this ideology, as with a pandemic. This requires empowering a new type of coalition—a

network of networks—that not only counters the extremists' narrative and seeks to intervene and replace it, but also gets ahead of it through inoculation.

And the new and virulent manifestations of these threats offer opportunities to create new alliances and networks to confront the ideology—from human rights and women's groups to archaeologists and conservationists. International security forces and private stability operations teams could be enlisted to protect vulnerable populations, sites, individuals, and species against violent extremists. This ideological fight is not just about terrorism. These are enemies of humanity—attempting to spread their ideology while reshaping borders, history, and identity.

CTC: In your guest lecture with our cadets, you discussed the importance of properly conceptualizing the risk and its impact on influencing national security policy? Some portray the Islamic State as an existential threat to the United States and its allies, while others seem to downplay the risks posed by the group relative to other national security threats. Where do you stand? What is at stake if we get this perception of risk wrong?

Zarate: Assessing threats and classifying the risks from terrorism are a fundamental part of how we calibrate our response, devise our policies and strategies, and ultimately make decisions about what the nation will do to defend itself. If we underestimate the threat, we run the risk of ignoring threats as they gather and then will have to react when it's too late. If we overestimate the risk, we may overreact, overextend, and misallocate our resources. We also need to be precise about the threats we are facing and allow for a "taxonomy" of threats that we constantly evaluate.

In this regard, we've heard the President talk about ISIS and terrorism not being an "existential" risk. Recalibrating and rationalizing risk is the right instinct, but articulating this in terms of "existential risk" has a strategically dangerous effect. This has the potential to dull the sense of urgency to confront the real and quickening strategic threat from ISIS and the movement that may follow.

Expressing a threat as an "existential" risk suggests a final stage of a manifested threat that could collapse a society. Using this construct as the benchmark that defines the nature, scale, and pace of U.S. interests and response to global terrorism distorts a more strategic and global view of the gathering threat. It doesn't account for the very real threat posed to our closest friends and allies, many of whom are fighting for their survival, as well as the externalities of terrorism like refugee flows and instability.

More importantly, such a maximalist formulation doesn't account for the reality that ISIS continues to adapt very quickly and may present new and more dangerous threats to U.S. and allied interests – from use of WMD to cyber attacks. Significantly, defining threats through the lens of "existential risk" doesn't fully recognize that a series of smaller-scale attacks—choreographed properly—could have broad social effects and political impact that affects the trajectory of nations and societies. We are seeing this in Europe now.

CTC: On the heels of the attacks in Paris and Brussels, what do you make of the current Islamic State threat in Europe? Do you see these attacks as part of a paradigm shift in the group's strategy moving forward, or is it an act of desperation of an organization on the decline in Syria and Iraq?

Zarate: This was a strategy not triggered by provocation or weak-



Juan C. Zarate

ness, but is rather a deliberate part of ISIS' long-term planning. Failing to understand and anticipate ISIS' intent and capabilities has led to some misguided assumptions that have now been shattered in the wake of the attacks in Paris and Brussels. As part of its broader strategy of confrontation and establishment of the caliphate, ISIS has intended to confront the West. This can be seen in that while it was creating its caliphate and expanding its provinces to places like Libya and Yemen, ISIS has been simultaneously planning to strike the West, using Western operatives flowing into the conflict zone by the thousands, and has openly attempted to inspire singular attacks by sympathetic radicals in Western societies. It has built these capabilities over time and taken advantage of intelligence and security gaps to implant operatives in Europe.

This should not have come as a surprise to those watching ISIS erase the border between Iraq and Syria, occupy major cities in the Middle East, and take advantage of the safe haven it has established and the foreign fighters flowing in and out of the region. Almost two years ago, my colleague, Tom Sanderson, and I wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* detailing the story of the sale of Belgian passports on the Syrian-Turkish border.¹ Indeed, with the thousands of foreign fighters traveling to terrorist-controlled territory and others animated by the allure and narrative of a historic and heroic caliphate battling infidel forces, ISIS and al-Qa`ida can more easily mobilize attacks against the West.

CTC: How does European CT need to respond to this threat? What is the United States' role here, and what can it do to best help our European allies?

Zarate: The United States and Europe are facing a common terrorist enemy. The United States must work closely with its European partners—to enable, support, and lead where necessary—to disrupt the short and long-term threats from terrorism.

The United States, Europe, regional partners, and the international community must deny physical safe haven and territory to terrorist groups – and ultimately wrest control of territory back from ISIS and al-Qa`ida. It is in these terrorist archipelagos now occupied and governed by terrorist groups that they are able to plot, train, interact, and adapt. In concert with Europe, the United States should help enable local proxies and allies on the ground to fight ISIS and al-Qa`ida directly.

The United States should enable European partners by spurring even greater intelligence- and information-sharing, forcing European partners to sit together to understand the unfolding threat and determine or establish new mechanisms to increase real-time information sharing tied to terrorist suspects and plots. This becomes critical as ISIS establishes or expands beachheads in places

like Sirte, Libya, and the Sinai. The West needs to defend against expeditionary terrorism coming from new safe havens.

The United States and Europe also need to work to undermine the ideology that animates the violent Sunni extremist movement. Finally, we must push government agencies to imagine the unimaginable and not underestimate the will and capacity of global terrorist organizations to strike Europe and the United States.

CTC: The fight for Mosul has apparently begun. How does it end?

Zarate: I have no doubt that Iraqi forces, supported by the Kurds, the United States, and the broader coalition, will retake Mosul. The question will be when, with how much bloodshed and cost, and whether Mosul and surrounding territory can be held, rebuilt, and defended. The longer we wait to retake Mosul, Raqqa, and key population centers, the harder it will be to dislodge ISIS from its strongholds and disrupt ongoing terrorist activities. Importantly, demonstrating that ISIS is losing in the physical space—and losing its hold on the caliphate—will begin to shatter the myth of ISIS

victory and the allure of the caliphate to the global movement. This is essential to stunting the expansion of the movement.

CTC: What is one thing that U.S. counterterrorism officials should pay more attention to than they are not?

Zarate: I worry about the quickening of the terrorist threat and the innovative adaptations from ISIS, al-Qa`ida, and related terrorist networks—including dangerous new attack methodologies, use of chemicals weapons, evolving cyber capabilities, creative and attractive leveraging of social media, and governance models. All of this is happening in an unstable and unmoored global environment where governance and authorities are challenged and asymmetric capabilities and awareness are growing.

U.S. counterterrorism officials should never underestimate the creativity of committed global terrorists, especially when they have time, space, and resources to adapt. We certainly shouldn't overestimate the enemy or hype threats, but we should never fall prey to underestimating them or suffer again from a failure of imagination. We should always be asking, "What comes next?" **CTC**

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The Resilience of al-Shabaab

By Christopher Anzalone

In the face of major territorial, military, and economic setbacks, the Somali insurgent-jihadi group al-Shabaab has proven remarkably resilient thanks to pragmatic decision-making and skilled tactical maneuvering. With strong interpersonal ties and a capable internal security network, the group's senior leadership continues to maintain overall unity and to ward off a strong challenge from Islamic State sympathizers. Despite its transnational rhetoric and affiliation with al-Qa`ida, al-Shabaab remains rooted in domestic Somali issues and clan politics. This domestic focus has contributed to a pragmatic battlefield strategy of classic guerilla warfare interspersed with high-profile, well-coordinated attacks on "soft targets," such as hotels and restaurants, in the Somali capital of Mogadishu.

Since withdrawing from Mogadishu in August 2011 under intense military pressure from a combined offensive by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the Somali Federal Government (SFG), and their allied local militias, al-Shabaab has suffered a series of military and territorial setbacks. This pressure has intensified over the past two years with the entrance of Kenyan military forces and the reentrance of Ethiopian troops into the fight, also supported by allied Somali militiamen. The result has been the slow but steady loss of insurgent-held territory across the country. In early October 2014 al-Shabaab lost control of its last major urban stronghold and access point to the Indian Ocean, the coastal town of Baraawe.^{1a} Despite having had to withdraw from lucrative urban centers such as Baidoa, Kismaayo, and Baraawe, al-Shabaab has proven remarkably resilient in the face of mounting local, regional, and interna-

tional pressure, including from the United States, as well as rising jihadi competitors and rivals, chief among them the Islamic State.

This article examines the evolution of al-Shabaab's tactical, recruitment, and media strategies and its continued attempt to exercise a form of insurgent governance over territory in the wake of battlefield setbacks, loss of territory including key economic centers, and growing challenges from jihadi rivals sympathetic to the call of the Islamic State. The article will explore the reasons for the Somali insurgent group's continued resilience. These factors include the weakness of the SFG, continued fighting between competing clan militias as well as between nominally SFG-aligned militias and the national army, and the flexibility shown by al-Shabaab leaders and field commanders in shifting back to classic guerilla warfare.²

A Tactical Shift?

On February 2, an al-Shabaab suicide bomber detonated his explosives on the Somali-owned Daallo Airlines flight 159, headed from Mogadishu to Djibouti. Seventy of the 74 passengers, including the bomber, had been recently re-booked from a canceled Turkish Airlines flight. Two passengers were injured but only the bomber was killed.³ According to SFG officials, who reviewed CCTV footage, a laptop rigged with explosives given to the bomber by two men who appear to have been airport workers was used in the attack.^{4 b} A source close to the investigation told CNN that the laptop bomb was sophisticated and went undetected by an airport X-ray machine.^c

In a statement released on February 13, al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for carrying out the bombing and declared that it had been targeting "Western intelligence officials" and the "Western and apostate [Somali] intelligence infrastructure."^d The attempt

b The suspected bomber has been identified as Abdullaahi Abdisalam Borleh, an Islamic school teacher from Hargeisa in the autonomous Somali region of Somaliland who was aged between 50 and 55 and in a wheelchair. Though he had been on government officials' radar, Borleh was not considered to be an extremist in his religiosity or political views. Abdi Guleed, "Somali plane bomber was known as religious but not extremist," Associated Press, February 16, 2016.

c At least 45 people have been arrested under suspicion of aiding the attack. See Robyn Kriel and Paul Cruickshank, "Source: 'Sophisticated' laptop bomb on Somali plane got through X-ray machine," CNN, February 12, 2016. Evidence points to either a convincing forgery by al-Shabaab of a letter purporting to be from the Somali embassy in Turkey and designed to facilitate the issuing of a Turkish work visa for Borleh or possible help from individuals within the SFG's foreign ministry. See Guleed. It is likely that extreme failures of airport security systems or inside help from individuals working in the airport played a major role in smuggling the bomb onto the flight. This is particularly concerning for government officials because the airport has three levels of security screening run by AMISOM troops, SFG security agents, and a Turkish company contracted to run airport operations. See Harun Maruf, "Somali Officials: Man Killed in Plane Bombing Given Laptop Before Flight," Voice of America, February 7, 2016; "Somalia's Beledweyne Airport Hit by Laptop Bomb," BBC News, March 7, 2016.

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to down the flight was, the insurgents claimed, part of an ongoing series of military and counter-intelligence operations targeting both local and foreign intelligence agents and operatives in Somalia since May 2014.⁶ On March 7, another laptop bomb wounded six people at an airport security screening area in the airport of Beledweyne in the Hiraan region bordering Ethiopia, and two other explosive devices, including one installed inside a printer, were defused.⁷ Although it did not issue a claim of responsibility, al-Shabaab is the main suspect.

Some have posited that al-Shabaab's decision to carry out spectacular and attention-grabbing terrorist attacks on major civilian targets such as Nairobi's Westgate Mall and Garissa University College marked a "shift in focus" for the group from insurgency to terrorism against "soft targets."⁸^d This risks over-simplifying matters. Al-Shabaab leaders, rather than "shifting" their focus completely toward terrorism and attacking largely civilian targets, continue to incorporate these types of attacks as an integral part of the group's evolving military strategy that mixes both high-profile operations against largely civilian targets, guerilla warfare, and surprise mass attacks on vulnerable AMISOM and SFG positions. Large-scale attacks on soft targets such as hotels and restaurants have been a particularly important part of al-Shabaab's military and political strategies since the beginning of renewed AMISOM-led offensives in 2011. Attacks on soft targets are usually justified through claims that SFG, African Union, or international officials frequent the attacked locations. In some cases, such as the Sahafi Hotel in central Mogadishu, the targeted location was known as a popular gathering place for SFG, AMISOM, and foreign government personnel and contractors.⁹

A Return to Guerilla Warfare

The vast majority of al-Shabaab's military operations and attacks are not on civilian soft targets. The group focuses instead on carrying out waves of hit-and-run, small-unit attacks on opposing forces as well as carrying out well-planned, coordinated assaults on AMISOM, SFG, and opposing militia bases and positions. This marks not so much an adoption of new tactics by al-Shabaab but rather a return to its 2007-2008 guerilla roots.¹⁰ Rather than continuing to telegraph and then launch mass frontline attacks on AMISOM and SFG positions as al-Shabaab did during the failed and costly "Ramadan Offensive" in Mogadishu in 2010, insurgent leaders publicly announced in August 2011 that they would shift back to guerilla tactics once they withdrew from the capital city.¹¹ Outnumbered and outgunned by AMISOM and SFG forces aided by U.S. drone and Special Forces strikes, al-Shabaab commanders realized that the asymmetric realities of the conflict required a different approach if they were to prolong the viability of their insurgency and ambitions of governance. This pragmatic approach

"The vast majority of al-Shabaab's attacks are not on soft targets. The group focuses instead on small-unit attacks and coordinated assaults. This marks not so much an adoption of new tactics but rather a return to its guerilla roots."

is explained by the fact that al-Shabaab, despite its transnational rhetoric and affiliation with al-Qa`ida, remains rooted in the Somali milieu and clan politics, despite its leaders' criticisms of clannism. Put more simply, the group's number-one ambition is restoring its power base in Somalia, and its strategy serves this aim.

Since 2012 and 2013, al-Shabaab has focused primarily on carrying out lower-risk attacks, many involving IEDs, on selected targets such as AMISOM, SFG, and allied militia checkpoints, camps, and along roads and supply routes. The insurgents have also carried out cross-border attacks inside Kenya, particularly in the Somali-majority North Eastern Province and Lamu County along the Indian Ocean.¹² By carrying out deadly raids, ambushes, and other military and terrorist operations inside Kenya, including the high-profile and politically embarrassing sieges of Nairobi's Westgate Mall in September 2013 and Garissa University College in April 2015, al-Shabaab leaders have tried to increase domestic pressure on the Kenyan government to withdraw its troops from Somalia by inflicting a high number of casualties and creating domestic instability.¹³

Al-Shabaab's shift, since 2012, toward favoring lower-risk, guerilla-style operations is evidenced by its public communiqués and operational reports. Since 2012, the most popular types of attacks include IEDs; ambushes on convoys and patrols; hit-and-run attacks, including the throwing of grenades and targeted mortar fire on checkpoints; the use of snipers; and the assassination of individual officials or members of the SFG, AMISOM, or their allied militias. The insurgents have supplemented these mostly small-scale operations, meant to "bleed" and destabilize its enemies, with sophisticated, well-planned, multi-pronged strikes carried out by multiple attackers on high-profile targets such as hotels and restaurants. Al-Shabaab also reports on how it counterattacks attempted advances by AMISOM, SFG, and allied militia forces as well as details on its arrest, trial, and execution of suspected spies.¹⁴ In carrying out this combination of attacks, al-Shabaab leaders hope to prevent AMISOM and the SFG from stabilizing the country, thus enabling the insurgents to continue to play spoiler and one day reclaim territorial control.

In mid-January, after an insurgent special operations unit, the Commander Saleh al-Nabhani Battalion,^e overran a Kenyan

d This type of attack on soft targets includes, for example, coordinated assaults on the Makka al-Mukkarama Hotel in Mogadishu in March 2015, the Beach View Hotel and Restaurant on Liido Beach in Mogadishu in January, and the Sahafi Hotel in central Mogadishu in November 2015.

Al-Shabaab often describes these soft targets as being intimately connected to its broader insurgency, for example labeling the Makka al-Mukkarama Hotel as "one of the retreats of the apostates in Mogadishu." See "Al-Shabab Storms Beachside Restaurant in Somali Capital," Al-Jazeera English, January 22, 2016; "Al-Shabab Assault Targets Senior Somali Officials," Al-Jazeera English, November 1, 2015; and al-Shabaab communiqué, "HSM Press Release: Mogadishu Attack," March 28, 2015.

e The name of the unit that carried out the attack is taken from the late al-Qa`ida operative Saleh al-Nabhani, who also served as an al-Shabaab military commander and trainer before being killed by U.S. Special Operations Forces on September 14, 2009. See "Profile: Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan," BBC News, September 15, 2009, and al-Shabaab communiqué, "Blood [Sacrifice for] the Islamic Ummah, Tidings of the Martyrdom of the Shaykh-Commander Abu Yusuf al-Nabhani," September 15, 2009.



Image from an al-Shabaab video purportedly showing the offensive on KDF El-Adde base on January 15, 2016

AMISOM camp at El-Adde in Somalia's Gedo region, killing or capturing as many as 100 Kenyan soldiers,^f al-Shabaab's sophisticated media department produced a slick propaganda film about the attack featuring Ahmad Iman Ali, the chief ideologue and leader of al-Shabaab's Kenyan foreign fighters, aimed directly at a Kenyan audience.^{15g} He declared that the El-Adde attack was carried out to avenge persecuted Muslims in Kenya and in particular in Eastleigh, the large Somali district in Nairobi.¹⁶ He alleged that Kenyan security forces have conducted kidnappings, rape, and extrajudicial killings and murders of residents, particularly women, and promised further attacks if the Kenyan government continued to 'oppress' its Muslim citizens.¹⁷ Repeating a similar media strategy as they previously used with the Ugandan and Burundian publics,

al-Shabaab leaders are once again trying to force governments providing troops to AMISOM to withdraw from Somalia by increasing domestic pressure on them.¹⁸

A Regional Media Strategy

Al-Shabaab's media department continues to maintain its focus on attracting regional foreign fighters to Somalia from around East Africa, particularly Swahili-speakers, as well as establishing ties with local militant groups in countries such as Kenya and Tanzania.¹⁹ East African foreign fighters have been actively involved in al-Shabaab since it emerged as a fully independent insurgent organization in 2007 following the December 2006 Ethiopian invasion. They have also been featured prominently in the group's propaganda films, including a 2010 recruitment film subtitled in Swahili, Arabic, and English.²⁰ The number of Swahili-speaking East Africans in its media operations campaign began to increase dramatically beginning in 2013.²¹ This recruitment effort includes media operations messaging that highlights discrimination and claims that Kenyan Muslims are being persecuted by their own government, such as extrajudicial killings allegedly carried out by Kenya's anti-terrorism police.²² Al-Shabaab, despite its claim that it places its "Islamic" identity over any other form of identity, has even made appeals in some of its media releases to Somali nationalism and pride, for example by highlighting the persecution of ethnic Somalis inside Kenya and the inclusion by the British colonial rulers of large, historically Somali regions inside the new Kenyan nation-state.²³

A Push Again for Territory

Despite being pushed out of major urban centers, al-Shabaab con-

^f Al-Shabaab's military affairs spokesman Abd al-Aziz Abu Mus'ab initially told BBC News that 63 Kenyan soldiers had been killed in the attack but later increased the estimated number to 100. See Aislinn Laing, "Bodies of Kenyan Soldiers Dragged Through Somali Streets after al-Shabaab Attack on Base," *Telegraph*, January 15, 2016; "New Details of El Adde Attack: Somali General Claims KDF Received Pre-attack Intelligence," Standard Digital News (Kenya), January 20, 2016; Abdi Sheikh and Feisal Omar, "Dozens of Kenyan Soldiers Reportedly Killed in Al-Shabab Attack in Somalia," *Globe and Mail*, January 15, 2016; and al-Shabaab communiqué, "100 Kenyan Invaders Massacred, Others Captured Alive," January 17, 2016.

^g Ali, the founder of an organization for Kenyan Muslim youth called the Muslim Youth Centre/Al-Hijra in Nairobi, had emerged in January 2012 as a main featured ideologue in al-Shabaab audio and audiovisual propaganda. See Christopher Anzalone, "Kenya's Muslim Youth Center and Al-Shabab's East African Recruitment," *CTC Sentinel* 5:10 (2012): p. 11 and Fredrick Nzes, "Al-Hijra: Al-Shabab's Affiliate in Kenya," *CTC Sentinel* 7:5 (2014): pp. 24-26.

tinues to control and govern territory. Previously, the group's regional and local administrations, which included offices and committees for education, missionary propagation (*dawa*), taxation and revenue collection, the judiciary, and the collection and distribution of religious charity and taxes (*zakat* and *sadqat*), ran a multi-layered form of insurgent governance of the type that its rival, the Islamic State, has expanded upon in Iraq, Syria, and Libya.²⁴ Al-Shabaab continues to administer and govern territory, including through the continued operation of sharia courts, zakat and taxation collection and distribution, clan outreach, and the running of schools, sharia institutes, and programs providing agricultural, medical, and food aid, though on a notably diminished scale due to its territorial losses since the spring of 2011.²⁵

Al-Shabaab's leadership is keenly interested in seizing back territory, seeking to take advantage of AMISOM and SFG re-deployments and failures by publicly retaking, even if temporarily, villages, towns, and other areas that their enemies' claim have been fully "liberated." In early February, for example, al-Shabaab units temporarily reentered parts of the important port city of Merca and issued statements and photographs of the event in a bid to broadcast an image of rejuvenation and strength.²⁶ Though insurgent forces only captured parts of the city and were forced to withdraw soon after reentering, they achieved a media, if not a tactical, victory through their presence and the raising of their flags in parts of the urban, economic hub. Al-Shabaab also recently temporarily recaptured areas in Afgooye to the south of Mogadishu after launching a surprise offensive.²⁷

Abu Ubayda Ahmad Omar, al-Shabaab's emir and successor to Ahmed "Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr" Godane, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike on September 1, 2014, has publicly announced the group's continuing desire to expand its territorial control through military and intelligence operations.²⁸ He also stated that the group continues to carry out of social services, religious and ideological education, and judicial affairs through affiliated sharia courts.²⁹ Al-Shabaab officials and affiliated as well as pro-insurgent media outlets also continue to publicize the insurgent group's exercise of governing authority and its attempt to monopolize violence as a means of both social control and revenue extraction. This media operations effort includes the dissemination of messages and interviews with al-Shabaab officials, local clan elders, and residents, the announcement of the recapture of territory, reports on insurgent social services, and the work of its various offices, in particular the judiciary.³⁰

Competition from the Islamic State

Al-Shabaab's newest domestic challenge is from disgruntled members attracted to the clarion call of the Islamic State for jihadi groups to affiliate with its "caliphate."³¹ Al-Shabaab experienced a period of significant internal discord between 2012 and 2013 when a num-

"The media apparatus of the Islamic State, in a bid to encourage defections from al-Shabaab and attract new Somali recruits, has produced a number of propaganda films aimed primarily at Somali audiences."

ber of prominent leaders and foreign fighters from within its ranks began criticizing Godane and his allies publicly.³² Despite the public nature and embarrassment caused, Godane triumphed, and most of the organization's regional governors, officials, and commanders remained loyal. However, the rapid rise of the Islamic State coupled with the death of Godane has presented al-Shabaab's current leadership with major, new challenges to its continued unity and strength.

The multi-tiered media apparatus of the Islamic State, in a bid to encourage defections from al-Shabaab and attract new Somali recruits to its own ranks, has produced a number of propaganda films aimed primarily at Somali audiences. The first was released in late May 2015 and featured four Somali foreign fighters and one Ethiopian foreign fighter in Iraq who urge Somalis to join the "caliphate upon the Prophet [Muhammad's] methodology," referring to the Islamic State, which they claim was the only organization "truly" avenging their humiliation and oppression at the hands of the "Ethiopian Christians."³³ This initial propaganda shot at al-Shabaab has been followed by a slate of releases between early October 2015 and January 2016 featuring Islamic State fighters, both Somali and non-Somali, who are stationed in different locations, including Syria, Libya, and Yemen. In these films, the fighters call on Somalis generally and al-Shabaab members specifically to join

i These dissidents included founding leaders Ibrahim al-Afghani, Mukhtar Robow, and preacher Mu'allim Burhan as well as the American foreign fighter and al-Shabaab media personality Omar "Abu Mansur al-Amriki" Hammami as well as other non-Somali foreign fighters. Infighting eventually led to the departure of Hasan Dahir Aweys and Robow from al-Shabaab. The former surrendered to SFG authorities in a negotiated deal, and Robow reportedly went into hiding in his home region of Bay and Bakool among his clan. It has been rumored that Robow has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, but concrete evidence for this is spotty at best. Other reports say that Robow, who rejected Godane's successor as emir, remains in his home region with his own fighters. See "Somali: Senior Radical Sheikh Mukhtar Robow Left Al Shabab," *Midnimo*, April 3, 2015; "Somalia: Intelligence Agencies Confirmed Al-Shabaab's New Leader," Geeska Afrika Online, September 6, 2014; Abdulkadir Khalif, "Al-Shabaab's Loyalty Split between Al-Qaeda and ISIS," *Africa Review*, November 14, 2015; and Jeremy Scahill, "The Purge: How Somalia's Al Shabaab Turned against Its Own Foreign Fighters," *Intercept*, May 19, 2015. Al-Afghani and Burhan were arrested in late June 2013 by al-Shabaab's intelligence and security wing, Amniyat, and shot to death soon thereafter. Their families claim both were executed, but al-Shabaab denied this and said the two were killed while trying to escape. Hammami, after a year on the run during which he had engaged in a war of words with al-Shabaab and its supporters online and on the ground, was finally tracked down and killed by the Amniyat in September 2013. See Christopher Anzalone, "The Rise and Decline of Al-Shabab in Somalia," *Turkish Review*, July 2, 2014, pp. 391-392, and Christopher Anzalone, "The Evolution of an American Jihadi: The Case of Omar Hammami," *CTC Sentinel* 5:6 (2012): p. 11.

^h The Islamic State's leadership is keen to win over local and regional jihadi groups to its side as affiliates and branches. By continuously expanding, or appearing to expand, its list of local and regional supporters, the Islamic State promotes an image of strength and steadfastness, as claimed in its popular slogan "*al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya baqiyya wa tatamaddad*" (remaining and expanding). This projection of power helps mask the steady battlefield and economic setbacks faced by the organization in Iraq and Syria, its main bases of operation, and is the centerpiece of its leaders' claim to govern a new "caliphate."

the Islamic State, the banners of the “caliphate,” and the only “true defenders of Islam.”³² This official Islamic State media output has been aided by similar calls from pro-Islamic State jihadi media outlets in the form of essays and films produced in Somali, Arabic, and English.^{33j}

The Islamic State and pro-Islamic State recruitment pitches have thus far met with limited success on the ground in Somalia and have elicited strong responses from al-Shabaab’s leadership. The most high-profile defection, however, from the latter to the former was that of Abd al-Qadir Mu’min, a prominent al-Shabaab preacher and religious authority previously based in the Golis Mountains in northern Somalia, along with an unknown number of rank-and-file fighters in late October 2015.³⁴ A frequent speaker at al-Shabaab’s public events, including its official celebration in the Lower Shabelle region in February 2012 to mark its formal affiliation with al-Qa`ida Central, Mu’min is symbolically important to the group and has significant scholarly credentials, for example giving a lengthy series of oral exegesis of the Qur’an.³⁵ Small groups of other disgruntled fighters and commanders have also defected since the autumn of 2015, but most have either reportedly had to flee the country for Islamic State strongholds such as Libya or been arrested, killed, or otherwise suppressed by al-Shabaab’s internal security network.^{36k} Al-Shabaab’s official spokesman, Ali Rage (Ali Dheere), issued a lengthy and stern warning at a press conference in early November 2015 that attempts to “divide the Muslims and the *mujahidin*” in Somalia will not be tolerated.^{37l} Al-Shabaab’s emir, Abu Ubayda, who previously served as a key aide to Godane and as al-Shabaab’s governor of the Bay and Bakool region, was reportedly involved in overseeing the crackdown on internal dissidents by al-Shabaab’s intelligence and security unit, Amniyat, and he has maintained close ties to other senior al-Shabaab leaders, which has likely strengthened his hand against pro-Islamic State elements.³⁸ The insurgents’ regional affiliates and allies, including the Kenyan Al-Muhajiroun group, which seems to be connected to al-Shabaab through an affiliation with Ahmad Iman Ali (the leader of al-Shabaab in Kenya), have also remained loyal, calling for unity and condemning defections such as Mu’min’s.³⁹

Pro-Islamic State defectors from al-Shabaab seem to be particularly strong in the northern Somali autonomous region of Puntland, where Mu’min was previously based, and clashes have erupted there

between al-Shabaab forces and defectors.⁴⁰ However, there have also reportedly been defections and arrests of defectors, both local Somalis and foreign fighters, by al-Shabaab’s Amniyat network in southern Somalia, including in the Lower and Middle Juba and Lower Shabelle regions.⁴¹ The Islamic State has also attracted Somali-American youth from Minnesota to fight in Syria and Iraq, youth who otherwise may have been drawn to al-Shabaab.⁴² The battle between al-Shabaab and the Islamic State is being fought not only on the ground inside Somalia but also online as supporters of both groups engage in fierce debates and mutual exchanges of insults and allegations.^m

On April 15, the Islamic State upped the ante by releasing a video showing a dozen or so masked fighters performing military maneuvers in a barren, rural area of Somalia as part of the “Military Camp of Shaykh Abu Nu’mān,” probably named after the former al-Shabaab commander Abu Nu’mān al-Yentari, who was killed by the Amniyat shortly after pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi with a small group of his fighters in the autumn of 2015.⁴³ Some of the fighters, speaking in Somali, urge their audience to join the Islamic State. At the end of the nearly 17-minute video, the small group of fighters is addressed by an individual who appears to be ‘Abd al-Qadir Mu’min, the prominent al-Shabaab preacher who pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi in October 2015. Mu’min had not been seen or heard from since a poor-quality audio recording of his bay`a was released last fall.

Though the Islamic State’s ideology, or aspects of it, are attractive to some members of al-Shabaab, the emergence of such a competitor also provides those disgruntled members a way to challenge the status quo on the ground in Somalia within the anti-SFG insurgency in a challenge to al-Shabaab’s dominance. However, the Islamic State faces an uphill battle if it wants to establish a strong foothold in Somalia. Domestically, the country has historically proven to be a difficult operating space for non-Somali militants, who are often bewildered by the complexities of local clan politics and find that many of its Somali allies are unreliable at best, extorting or otherwise siphoning money away from foreign groups while providing little in the way of local support. This was the case in the 1990s when al-Qa`ida was seeking to enter the country. Ultimately the group’s leadership decided that other regions in the Horn of Africa, particularly areas suffering from weak governance such as the Swahili Coast of Kenya, were more conducive arenas for its operations.⁴⁴ Al-Shabaab’s leadership is primarily concerned with establishing an insurgent state inside Somalia, a goal that requires support from local Somali actors and segments of society, the same supporters who are likely to be suspicious and hostile to the largely foreign Is-

j These sympathetic jihadi media groups include the Habashah Media Foundation, whose presence on Twitter through Somali, Arabic, and English accounts was short-lived in October 2015.

k At least one prominent al-Shabaab defector to the Islamic State has been killed by al-Shabaab, Shaykh Hussein Abdi Gedi, and four other defectors were killed in the Middle Juba region after being tracked down by the Amniyat. Gedi had previously served as al-Shabaab’s deputy governor of the Juba region before defecting and becoming a recruiter of pro-Islamic State Somali fighters. See Voice of America, “Suspected Leader of Pro-IS Al-Shabab Faction Reported Killed” and Harun Maruf, “Al-Shabab Official Threatens Pro-Islamic State Fighters,” Voice of America, November 24, 2015.

l Al-Shabaab officials have thus far taken a relatively low-key approach in addressing Islamic State attempts to recruit from within its ranks and sow internal discord. This follows a pattern set in 2012 and 2013 during the infighting between Godane and his supporters and their internal critics such as Aweys, Robow, al-Afghani, Burhan, and Hammami. Rather than release a spate of media releases, al-Shabaab leaders have preferred to rely on the competence of their internal security forces in stomping out dissent as quickly and relatively quietly as possible.

m In one major exchange in early November 2015, online al-Shabaab supporters accused the Islamic State and its Somali supporters (accurately) of plagiarizing footage from an al-Shabaab propaganda film, removing the logo of the group’s Al-Kataib Media Foundation, and presenting it as “new” footage of pro-Islamic State defectors from al-Shabaab inside the country. They tweeted anti-Islamic State messages pointing out this theft using the Arabic hashtag “Baghdadi’s organization is stealing from the media releases of Al-Kataib.” Other al-Shabaab supporters tweeted a play-on-words of the Islamic State’s slogan to be “the Caliphate upon the Prophet’s methodology,” dubbing the organization instead a “caliphate upon the methodology of theft.” The accounts have since been shut down, but screen captures of some of the tweets are available at <https://occidentblog.wordpress.com/2016/04/06/references-for-ctc-sentinel-article-the-resilience-of-al-shabab-april-2016/>.

lamic State. If the Somali insurgent group was to pledge allegiance to the latter, it would likely lose the already diminishing domestic support that it still possesses and could much more easily be branded by its enemies as a foreign tool. This, in addition to maintaining its own monopoly on anti-government violence and insurgent rule and loyalty to Ayman al-Zawahiri, is likely one of factors at play in al-Shabaab leaders' decision to resist so far calls from the Islamic State to join its ranks.ⁿ

Conclusion

Al-Shabaab, in the face of significant territorial losses and military and economic pressure, has proven to be remarkably resilient. The Somali insurgent group has survived leadership decapitation at multiple levels, including the killing of its emir, Godane, in September 2014 and numerous other senior leaders and field commanders since 2007, thanks to robust and capable senior and regional leadership networks.

Al-Shabaab is also able to absorb significant military losses and setbacks, such as a series of deadly airstrikes by the U.S. military on March 6 on the "Raso" insurgent training camp where insurgent fighters were allegedly amassing in preparation for a major attack.^o The Pentagon claims it killed 150 insurgents and a local Somali government official has claimed it killed at least 200.⁴⁵ Al-Shabab's military spokesman, Abd al-Aziz Abu Mus'ab, denied the Pentagon's claims, saying that the insurgent group does not gather in such large numbers as a security precaution against precisely such a catastrophic airstrike.⁴⁶^p Although the details of the attack

planning at the Raso camp are unclear, it is possible that the insurgents had grown overly bold following the success of their attack on AMISOM's El-Adde base. This would represent a rare departure from the cautious battlefield strategy that has allowed the group to survive and rebound.

Al-Shabaab's media capabilities, though impacted by the group's on-the-ground setbacks, remain strong and multi-faceted. In addition to its video, audio, and written releases, the insurgent group also maintains local media capabilities within Somalia, including domestic radio broadcasts. It is also capable of responding quickly, within a matter of days, to counter claims by the SFG, AMISOM, or the U.S. government, as it did regarding the Raso airstrikes.

Finally, al-Shabaab leadership has successfully navigated, thus far, dangerous periods of internal discord and bitter infighting. It has survived and ultimately quashed internal challenges from disgruntled foreign fighters such as Omar Hammami as well as dissident founding leaders such as Mukhtar Robow, Ibrahim al-Afghani, and Mu'allim Burhan. Despite the public criticisms of Godane from senior figures such as these, the majority of al-Shabaab's regional governors and officials remained loyal to him. The current challenge posed by the Islamic State and its Somali sympathizers has also been limited thanks to the control capability of the Amniyat and the strength of the ties between the group's emir and its administrative and regional leaders.

Though the threat of further defections to pro-Islamic State groups remains high, al-Shabaab will likely continue to be able to prevent mass defections thanks to its resilience in Somalia and East Africa and the steady decline of the Islamic State's fortunes, and thus its appeal to jihadis both inside and outside of Somalia. U.S. military strikes on al-Shabaab, such as the recent reported killing of Hassan Ali Dhoore, a member of the Amniyat and key operational planner involved in organizing several major insurgent attacks on soft targets inside Mogadishu in 2014 and 2015, will continue to weaken the organization but are unlikely to deal it a fatal blow.⁴⁷ Despite suffering casualties and in spite of the targeted killings of individual commanders, al-Shabaab will continue to benefit from the weakness of the SFG, which still relies on thousands of AMISOM troops as a bulwark against the insurgents, forces supplied by regional powers with often divergent interests inside Somalia. CTC

- n Godane's decision in 2012 to affiliate formally with al-Qa'ida was also controversial domestically and even among al-Shabaab's leadership. However, the group has largely remained free to pursue its own interests in Somalia and the surrounding region, arguably in large part because of the diminished capabilities of al-Qa'ida Central under Ayman al-Zawahiri. In contrast, the Islamic State has demonstrated a much stronger interest in exerting more centralized control on at least some aspects of the activities pursued by its own regional affiliates, particularly in the centralization of media production and releases but also in the realm of ideology and insurgent rule.
- o Details of this alleged coming attack are unclear and were not specified by U.S. government officials.
- p Several days later, al-Shabaab officials also denied reports that its governor of the Hiraan region, Muhammad Mire, and another senior official and the region's former insurgent governor, Yusuf Ali Ugaas, were killed in these airstrikes. Mire attended a public execution by the insurgent group of a captured SFG soldier in the town of Buqa Qabe in the Hiraan region on March 10, four days after the U.S. airstrikes, and claimed that Ugaas is also still alive. Hamza Mohamed, "Al-Shabab Denies Top Leaders Killed in US Air Strikes," Al-Jazeera English, March 10, 2016.

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The Kingdom's Perfect Storm: Sectarian Tension and Terrorism in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province

By Chris Zambelis

With Saudi Arabia now firmly in the Islamic State's crosshairs, concern over sectarian tensions in the kingdom's volatile Eastern Province is rapidly increasing. The Islamic State has initiated a campaign of violence and terrorism targeting Saudi Shi'a to create and take advantage of worsening relations between Sunnis and Shi'a. The group has also increasingly targeted Saudi security forces. This apparent shift may represent an attempt to exact revenge against the monarchy over its role in organizing a multinational military coalition to contain and ultimately destroy it. It may also reflect the Islamic State's growing confidence in its capacity to organize and sustain a violent campaign against the monarch. Meanwhile, the kingdom's execution of dissident Shi'a cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr in January has aggravated an already incendiary situation. Taken together, these developments portend a period of potentially unprecedented instability in the foreseeable future.

Saudi Arabia's execution of influential dissident Shi'a cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr in January has had major repercussions for the kingdom's domestic and regional standing. A longtime critic of the Saudi royal family, the late al-Nimr evolved into a vocal advocate for Saudi Arabia's marginalized Shi'a minority and a symbol of defiance and resistance to the political and religious legitimacy commanded by the kingdom. Al-Nimr's execution has cast light on Saudi Arabia's fractious internal sectarian dynamics and its contentious relationship with Iran. It has also drawn attention to the troubled disposition of Saudi Arabia's Shi'a minority and the circumstances they endure in the kingdom's Eastern Province.

A Targeted Minority

Saudi Arabia's Shi'a are concentrated in the oases of Qatif and al-Hasa in Eastern Province where they comprise a majority.^a Eastern Province is the kingdom's largest province in geographical

terms and the home of most of its crude oil production capacity.^b Multiple researchers^c have found that Shi'a in Saudi Arabia are often subject to widespread religious prejudice that is a byproduct of the austere Wahhabist strain of Sunni Islam that is promulgated by Saudi clerics. This is the case even as the kingdom's political establishment touts its efforts to improve the position of Shi'a in Saudi society in numerous contexts.^c Some Saudi clerics go so far as labeling them heretical, apostate, and idolatrous.^d They also contend with disproportionately higher levels of poverty and underdevelopment and complain of other socioeconomic inequalities relative to the Sunni majority.^d

Al-Nimr's execution occurred against the backdrop of an escalating terrorist offensive by the self-proclaimed Islamic State within Saudi Arabia's borders. As part of its broader military and ideological campaign to expand the boundaries of its self-styled caliphate, the Islamic State's commander and self-professed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced in an audio statement in November 2014 the Islamic State's intention to target the Saudi royal family. He also proclaimed the creation of an operational presence within the kingdom comprised of Saudis who had sworn allegiance to its cause.^d Al-Baghdadi's recorded missive included an explicit threat against the kingdom's Shi'a minority and a directive to target them alongside others whom he called polytheists as a prelude to the cleansing

b The strategic significance of Eastern Province to the economy of Saudi Arabia—the world's largest oil exporter and second-largest source of proven oil reserves—cannot be overstated. Yet Eastern Province's importance goes beyond oil. For example, Saudi Arabia has moved to assess unconventional gas potential in Eastern Province. See "Saudi Aramco Says Jafura Unconventional Gas Promising," Reuters, March 30, 2016. Eastern Province is also a vital industrial hub. It is home to Jubail Industrial City, which is counted as both the largest industrial city in the Middle East and among the world's largest industrial cities. Overall, economic activity in Eastern Province accounts for approximately 60 percent of Saudi Arabia's total GDP. Notably, Saudi Arabia has always touted Eastern Province as an ideal and lucrative investment location. See Dr. Reza Fathollahzadeh Aghdam, "Why Invest in Eastern Province?" Asharqia Chamber, 2008; "Everything You Need to Know About Eastern Province," Asharqia Chamber.

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of the Arabian Peninsula of its Shi`a presence and eventual attacks against the royal family itself.⁴

The Islamic State's intentions toward Saudi Arabia were elaborated upon further in releases of the fifth and 13th editions of *Dabiq*, its official magazine, in November 2014⁵ and January 2016,⁶ respectively. A series of high-profile terrorist attacks targeting Shi`a houses of worship and religious gatherings and other threatening incidents in Eastern Province since 2015 appear to indicate that al-Baghdadi's instructions have been operationalized. Saudi security forces have reportedly disrupted numerous other plots implicating the Islamic State in possible attacks across the country. These include the purported dismantling of an operational cell referred to as *Jund al-Balad al-Haramein* (Soldiers of the Land of the Two Holy Places) that Saudi authorities have connected to the Islamic State.⁷ The Islamic State has also claimed responsibility for the April 5 assassination of a police colonel in the town of al-Dawadmi, located about 124 miles west of the capital Riyadh.⁸ It also took credit for an April 4 improvised explosive device attack targeting a police station in the town of al-Dilam about 60 miles south of Riyadh.⁹ The February 17 murder of a member of the kingdom's Special Emergency Force, a unit analogous in function to U.S. Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) formations, in al-Qassim Province by six members of his own family who had reportedly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, is another example of the Islamic State's reach in Saudi society.¹⁰ The Islamic State also took credit for the suicide bombing on August 6, 2015, that targeted Saudi security forces in a Sunni mosque in Abha in the southwestern Asir Province near the Saudi-Yemeni border.⁹

The noticeable uptick in attacks targeting Saudi security forces may signal efforts by the Islamic State to retaliate against the kingdom for its efforts to organize a multinational military coalition against it. It may also be suggestive of the extent of the Islamic State's operational capacity in Saudi Arabia. In this regard, the group may feel that it has achieved a sufficient operational capacity that would allow it to launch and maintain an armed campaign well beyond Eastern Province. Saudi authorities also claim to have disrupted numerous plots by the Islamic State to execute attacks against Shi`a Muslims and Shi`a-affiliated locations.

Nevertheless, it has been the Shi`a-dominated Eastern Province that has borne the brunt of the Islamic State's attacks.¹⁰ Some Shi`a believe that some Saudi police have turned a blind eye to the Islamic State's campaign against them.¹¹ The pejorative label *rafidah* (rejectionists) and similar derogatory refrains that are frequently ascribed to Shi`a believers by some Saudi religious scholars and Saudi-owned media and other information outlets are mirrored in the hardline Salafist worldview promoted by the Islamic State. It can be deduced the latter enjoys sympathy among a not insignificant segment of Saudi society given the relatively high numbers of Saudis who have joined the Islamic State.¹² Saudi Arabia's track record of promoting Wahhabist and other Salafist belief systems throughout the broader Middle East and Islamic world has repre-

"Much like its antecedents, the Islamic State demonstrates a clear predilection for sowing sectarian strife and exploiting existing fault lines in Saudi society, most notably between Sunni and Shi`a believers."

sented a pillar of its foreign policy and a means by which to project its influence, especially in the context of its rivalry with Iran, and has also contributed to Shi`a misgivings regarding the kingdom's intentions.¹³

A convergence of overlapping factors that encompass social, political, economic, and security trends as well as broader regional diplomatic and geopolitical currents are contributing to a climate of heightened tensions in Saudi Arabia. Eastern Province has long been a locus of political agitation and grassroots opposition to the monarchy, with Shi`a protesters on the forefront of the largest—albeit widely unnoticed—demonstrations ever witnessed in the kingdom.¹⁴¹⁵ The introduction of the Islamic State into the equation has amplified the region's criticality to the course of developments in Saudi Arabia. Much like its antecedents al-Qa`ida in Iraq and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State demonstrates with its pattern of attacks a clear predilection for sowing sectarian strife and exploiting existing fault lines in Saudi society, most notably between Sunni and Shi`a believers, in the hope of inciting a civil war to undermine and ultimately destroy the monarchy. Central to the Islamic State's strategy is to provoke a retaliatory response by Shi`a against Sunnis, a prospect that would exacerbate an already combustible domestic scenario. When combined with Saudi Arabia's entrenched antagonism toward its Shi`a subjects, Eastern Province's human geography provides the Islamic State with a fertile landscape to nurture and expand its campaign.¹⁶

The Shi`a Question

It is difficult to misinterpret the political optics and symbolism surrounding al-Nimr's execution. The circumstances surrounding al-Nimr's arrest, trial, subsequent conviction, and death sentence had drawn global attention from international human rights and other activist bodies.¹⁵ The events leading to al-Nimr's execution remain

^g It is worth noting that Eastern Province's position as a historical center of political activism and dissent extends beyond expressions of Shi`a identity. For example, Eastern Province was also a center of various pan-Arab nationalist-, Nasserist-, Baathist-, labor, and communist-led mobilization currents against the monarchy. For more background, see Toby Matthiesen, "Migration, Minorities, and Radical Networks: Labour Movements and Opposition Groups in Saudi Arabia, 1950-1975," *International Review of Social History* 59:3 (Autumn 2014), pp. 473-504.

^h While the Islamic State's influence and presence continues to expand in Saudi Arabia, the kingdom remains in the crosshairs of al-Qa`ida and its Yemen-based affiliate, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula. Meanwhile, the Islamic State has also gained an operational foothold in Yemen, further entrenching its position on the Arabian Peninsula. For more background, see Gregory D. Johnsen, "Al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State Benefit as Yemen War Drags On," *CTC Sentinel* 9:1 (2016).

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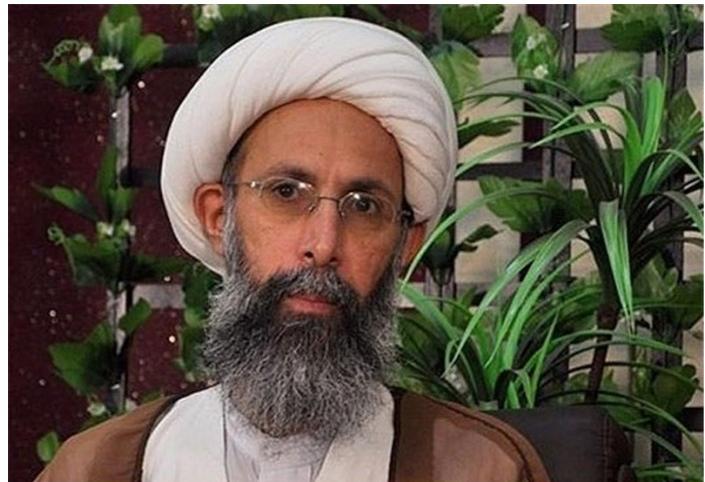
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shrouded in mystery. Al-Nimr was shot and arrested in July 2012 near his hometown of al-Awamiyah in Eastern Province's Qatif Governorate for his alleged role in confronting Saudi security forces during an operation to apprehend a wanted suspect.ⁱ It has been suggested it was al-Nimr's activism on behalf of Saudi Shi'a and his public denunciations of the royal family combined with his growing popularity, especially among Shi'a youth, that sealed his fate.^j Al-Nimr's 2009 declaration that Eastern Province should contemplate secession if the status of Shi'a does not improve catalyzed the royal family's concerns about the prospect of an internal rebellion and the potential for outside intervention by Iran.^k This is the case despite the late cleric's insistence that the Shi'a struggle in the kingdom is rooted in domestic rather than regional and geopolitical issues.^l Al-Nimr's strong statements were broadcast following a period of heightened tensions sparked by clashes between Shi'a pilgrims and Saudi security forces and members of the Commission of the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice—Saudi Arabia's religious police—at the Baqi Cemetery in Medina.^m

ⁱ Saudi authorities also arrested and detained al-Nimr briefly in 2004 and again in 2006. According to human rights groups, al-Nimr appeared to have been tortured during his detention. Mark Townsend, "Sheikh al-Nimr: Shia Cleric Was a Thorn in Saudi Regime's Side," *Guardian*, January 2, 2016. Numerous conflicting accounts regarding the events leading up to al-Nimr's 2012 arrest abound. For more details, see "Fact Check: The Truth About Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr," *Jadaliyya*, January 5, 2016. For more background surrounding al-Nimr's most recent arrest, see Nabil Bulos, "Who Was Sheik Nimr al-Nimr? A Look at the Man Whose Execution Rocked the Middle East," *Los Angeles Times*, January 5, 2016.

^j Despite al-Nimr's unquestioned influence in Eastern Province, Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, the founder of the Shi'a Islamic Reform Movement, is widely regarded as commanding the largest following among Saudi Shi'a. Al-Nimr and al-Saffar draw from the same ideological origins, namely, the teachings of Ayatollah Muhammed Husseini Shirazi, an Iraqi-Iranian cleric whose influence extends to Shi'a believers throughout the Middle East. Inspired by the Iranian Revolution, al-Shirazi's teachings encouraged a transnational Shi'a activist current that prompted al-Saffar to organize Shi'a in Qatif and al-Hasa to rise up against the monarchy in 1979-1980. This resulted in a concomitant crackdown by the kingdom that eventually forced al-Saffar, al-Nimr, and other prominent Shi'a clerics and activists into exile. The 1979-1980 uprising in Qatif and al-Hasa continues to shape Saudi Arabia's calculus toward its Shi'a minority and al-Nimr's potential as an organizer of grassroots opposition. Despite their common ideological origins, al-Saffar and al-Nimr eventually adopted different approaches to their activism on behalf of the kingdom's Shi'a. For example, al-Saffar and other clerical leaders and activists who organized in opposition to the monarchy eventually agreed to Saudi Arabia's offer of an amnesty in return for their commitment to abandon opposition activities. Al-Saffar has since promoted a quietist and overall accommodationist position as part of his engagement with the kingdom. In contrast, al-Nimr opposed any reconciliation with the monarchy, leading to a wider ideological split between followers of Shirazi. For historical context on al-Saffar's Shi'a Islamic Reform Movement, see Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 1999), pp. 195-228. See also Frederic M. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 139. For more background on the Shirazi movement, see Toby Matthiesen, "The World's Most Misunderstood Martyr," *Foreign Policy*, January 8, 2016. For details on the different competing ideological currents derived from Shirazi, see Haytham Mouzahem, "Saudi Arabia Clamps Down on Dissent," *Al-Monitor*, May 13, 2013.

^k Al-Nimr's family pedigree has also likely informed the monarchy's approach to the late cleric. For example, al-Nimr's grandfather led a revolt against the House of Saud in 1929-1930 after it had claimed dominion over eastern parts of the Arabia. See "After the Execution: The Kingdom's Shi'a are Angry," *Economist*, March 19, 2016.



Sheikh Nimr Baqir Al-Nimr

The role played by Saudi Arabia's Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) in the handling of al-Nimr's case warrants closer consideration. Established in 2008, the SCC is charged with prosecuting criminal cases involving terrorism.¹⁸ Al-Nimr was executed among 47 others on a battery of terrorism-related charges that represented the kingdom's largest mass execution since 1980.¹⁹ Three other Shi'a activists were executed along with al-Nimr. The remaining 43 individuals included dozens of Saudis linked to numerous al-Qa'ida terrorist attacks and other terrorism-related activities in the kingdom between 2003 and 2006.²⁰ The inclusion of al-Nimr among known al-Qa'ida members, including militants who have targeted U.S. and foreign interests and personnel in Saudi Arabia, in essence, likens the late cleric to some of the kingdom's most dangerous and violent opponents. More importantly, it signals Saudi Arabia's determination to root out all forms of domestic political dissent. Reformist currents that challenge the authority of the monarchy and call for a more participatory and democratic form of governance appear to be seen by some key figures in the Saudi power structure as an existential threat.

The fallout that followed al-Nimr's execution was swift. International human rights organizations strongly condemned Saudi Arabia's decision to proceed with the execution.²¹ Shi'a protesters took to the streets across Eastern Province, prompting a violent crackdown and increasing repression across the region.²² Protests in solidarity with the late al-Nimr erupted around the region. Iranian demonstrators ransacked the Saudi embassy in Tehran and consulate in Mashhad, prompting Saudi Arabia to cut ties with Iran.²³ Lebanese Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah lambasted Saudi Arabia for its actions.²⁴ Leading Iraqi Shi'a cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani also admonished the kingdom while fellow Iraqi Shi'a leader Moqtada al-Sadr appealed for Iraqi Shi'a to organize pro-

^l Saudi Arabia executed 63 militants associated with the violent seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca led by Juhayman al-Otaibi in 1979. For more background on the aforementioned events, see Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege at Mecca: The 1979 Uprising at Islam's Holiest Shrine*, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2007).

^m Many of those executed represented the core of al-Qa'ida's operational cohort in Saudi Arabia in the early 2000s, including leading al-Qa'ida ideologue Faris Ahmed Jamaal al-Showail al-Zahrani. See "Saudi Arabia Executes 47 on Terrorism Charges," *Al-Jazeera*, January 3, 2016.

tests.²³ In Iraq the Shi`a-dominated al-Hashad al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Committees), a government-sponsored paramilitary detachment that was organized to augment regular Iraqi security forces in its counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaign against the Islamic State, have taken notice of what they see as Saudi Arabia's complicity in the plight of their coreligionists.²⁴ Shi`a demonstrators took to the streets in Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Yemen, Pakistan, and Indian-controlled Kashmir in solidarity with the executed cleric.²⁵ U.S. and European cities also witnessed protests in solidarity with al-Nimr.²⁶

It is impossible to detach Saudi Arabia's treatment of al-Nimr and its approach toward its Shi`a community without accounting for the kingdom's rivalry with Iran and broader regional geopolitical trends. There appears to be a tendency among key figures in Saudi Arabia's power structure to view the Shi`a as a potentially disloyal fifth column and any expressions of political dissent in Eastern Province as a vehicle of an Iranian-led expansionist campaign.²⁷ This rivalry is often explained through a lens of sectarianism. In this interpretation, Saudi Arabia views Shi`a Iran as a hostile threat with aspirations of regional hegemony.ⁿ In reality, the source of acrimony is rooted in traditional geopolitical disputes.^o Saudi Arabia accused al-Nimr of advocating for the implementation of *Wilayet al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurisprudent), the revolutionary style of clerical rule promoted by the Ayatollah Khomeini that served as the foundation of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.^p For Saudi Arabia, al-Nimr's decade-long stay in Iran as a seminary student in Qom beginning in 1979 and later travels to Iran following a crackdown against Shi`a in the 1990s hardened its opinion toward the dissident cleric.^q

The saga surrounding the late al-Nimr is not over. The late cleric's 22-year-old nephew, Ali Baqir Muhammed al-Nimr, is also in custody and faces execution after being arrested as a teenager in

"The Islamic State may eventually leverage the sizeable pool of Saudi volunteers who have traveled to major jihadist battlefields such as Iraq and Syria."

2012 for participating in anti-government and pro-democracy protests between 2011 and 2012 during the wave of popular unrest that gripped the wider Arab world.^r

Enter the Islamic State

The Islamic State's enmity toward the Saudi royal family is without question. The kingdom's centrality to its overall campaign is likewise apparent in its symbology, ideology, and military strategy.²⁸ In the historical context of radical Islamist militancy, the Islamic State's opposition to the Saudi royal family is not unique. Like its ideological progenitor al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State derives its opposition to Saudi Arabia from what it sees as the kingdom's corruption, despotism, and strategic relationship with the United States that are seen as personifying its existence. The Islamic State does not acknowledge Saudi Arabia's position as the custodian of the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina and considers any religious legitimacy decreed by the royal family as a blasphemy. In its view, Saudi Arabia acts as a proxy of the United States and its predatory agenda toward the Middle East and greater Islamic world. Much like al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State eschews direct references to Saudi Arabia in favor of *Balad al-Haramein* (Land of the Two Holy Places) as a sign of its contempt toward the royal family. The Islamic State's reference to the *al-Saloul*—a pejorative twist of the al-Saud namesake—in its discourse is further evidence of the depths of its animosity toward the royal family.^s Saudi Arabia's oil wealth and the strategic relevance to the global economy—Saudi Arabia is the world's biggest exporter of crude oil and second-largest oil producer—is also not lost on the Islamic State.

While it has singled out the royal family in its public and written discourse, in tangible operational terms, the Islamic State has concentrated its efforts on attacking and killing Shi`a in Eastern Province. As its campaign continues to escalate, the Islamic State may eventually leverage the sizeable pool of Saudi volunteers who have traveled to major jihadist battlefields such as Iraq and Syria. Just as important, Saudi foreign fighters have distinguished themselves on the battlefield in positions of leadership as well as a wellspring of suicide bombers.²⁹ While reliable estimates of the numbers of Saudis who may have returned to the kingdom are difficult to pinpoint, there is a wide body of evidence to suggest that Saudis are among the most widely represented foreign fighter cohorts in Syria

ⁿ In addition to Saudi Arabia, these perceptions are evident among the Arab monarchies that make up the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is playing out in numerous crisis zones, including Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen where Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in proxy wars through an amalgam of rival political parties, insurgent movements, and terrorist organizations.

^o The implementation of the nuclear accord signed between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1), known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also shapes Saudi Arabia's calculus toward Iran. Despite its longstanding strategic alliance with the United States, Saudi Arabia along with other key U.S. allies worry that an enduring détente and eventual rapprochement between the United States and Iran will diminish their importance in the eyes of Washington. Saudi Arabia and other major energy producers in the GCC likewise are wary of Iran's return to international energy and financial markets.

^p Al-Nimr went to great lengths to distance himself from Iran and instances where he expressed anti-U.S. sentiments in his public discourse. He went as far as to meet with U.S. diplomatic officials in Saudi Arabia. Details surrounding al-Nimr's meetings with U.S. diplomatic officials were disclosed in leaked U.S. Embassy cables published by WikiLeaks, dated August 23, 2008.

^q In addition, despite not publicly providing evidence to support its claims, Saudi Arabia has accused al-Nimr of membership in Hizballah al-Hijaz, a Saudi-based Shi`a militant movement implicated in numerous attacks, including the 1996 attack on the Khobar Towers that killed 19 U.S. servicemen. See Liz Sly, "Who is the Saudi Cleric Whose Death Caused the Riyadh-Tehran Blowup?" *Washington Post*, January 4, 2016.

^r The younger al-Nimr is reported to have been subject to torture and other abuses while in custody. See Michael E. Miller, "Ali al-Nimr was a Boy When Thrown in Saudi Prison. Now He is a Man, and is Sentenced to Die," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2015.

^s In radical Islamist discourse, references to al-Saloul draw attention to the family that was responsible for protecting the Kaaba holy shrine in Mecca during the pre-Islamic pagan era.

and Iraq.^t The potential return of battle-hardened and tactically proficient fighters to the kingdom from warzones such as Syria and Iraq, regardless of their prior organizational affiliations, enhances the Islamic State's potential recruiting pool. The return of Saudi volunteers who traveled to Iraq to join the insurgency against the United States were integral to al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's 2003-2006 campaign against the kingdom.³⁰ Saudi Arabia will likely be confronted with a similar challenge down the line.

The Islamic State is implicated in a number of terrorist attacks targeting Shi`a mosques and affiliated targets in Eastern Province. An accurate picture of the Islamic State's operational presence within the kingdom is hard to discern. In accordance with its *wilayat* (province) model of fostering and recognizing discontinuous centers of influence and authority in areas and among communities where it has gained a foothold, three distinct operational nodes representing the Islamic State have declared their existence in Saudi Arabia: Wilayat al-Najd (Najd Province), Wilayat al-Hijaz (Hijaz Province), and Wilayat Bahrain (Bahrain Province).^u

On November 4, 2014, three unidentified masked shooters targeted a group of Shi`a men in the town of al-Salwah, in Eastern Province's al-Hasa Governorate, killing five. The attack occurred as Shi`a believers marked Ashoura, the occasion marking the death of Imam Hussein, the Prophet Muhammed's grandson, at the Battle of Karbala.³¹ The Islamic State claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing on May 22, 2015, targeting the Imam Ali mosque during Friday prayers in the village of al-Qadeeh in Eastern Province's Qatif Governorate. The attack, which killed 21 and injured over 80 others, represented the first suicide bombing targeting a Shi`a mosque in Saudi Arabia.³² The Islamic State claimed responsibility for an October 2015 suicide bombing against the Ismaili al-Mashad Mosque in the southwestern city of Najran in the eponymous province near the Saudi-Yemeni border that left two worshippers dead and over 10 wounded. The alleged attacker, Abu Ishaq Jizani, is reported to have been associated with the Islamic State's Wilayat al-Hijaz faction.³³ As a branch of Shi`ism, Ismailis have drawn the ire of the Islamic State and other violent Salafist militants throughout the greater Middle East. The Islamic State's Wilayat Najd branch reiterated its commitment to the expulsion of Shi`a from the Arabian Peninsula in an audio message issued in October 2015. In doing so, the message drew attention to the purported crimes committed by the Shi`a, al-Nimr's alleged secessionist ambitions, and apparent efforts by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to achieve an understanding with Iran.³⁴

In addition to their terrorist campaign inside Saudi Arabia, Saudi-based Islamic State operatives have been implicated in attacks targeting Shi`a outside of the kingdom. The Islamic State's

Wilayat al-Najd faction claimed responsibility for the June 2015 suicide bombing against the Imam Sadiq Mosque in Kuwait City's Sawaber District. The attack, which occurred during Friday prayers in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, left 28 dead and over 200 injured, and was executed by Saudi citizen Fahad Suleiman al-Gabbaa. Al-Gabbaa is reported to have flown to Kuwait only hours before executing his attack.³⁵

The spate of attacks targeting Shi`a believers and houses of worship in Eastern Province coupled with local sentiment that the regime has turned a blind eye to the sectarian-inspired attacks against them has catalyzed the community to action. Saudi Shi`a community leaders have organized numerous self-defense committees to protect Shi`a houses of worship and other locations.³⁶ The shooting deaths of two Saudi police officers in Eastern Province by unidentified gunmen has pointed to the possibility that the utility of violent resistance against the royal family may be gaining currency among some segments of the Shi`a community.³⁷

Conclusion

With Saudi Arabia now firmly in the Islamic State's crosshairs, concern over sectarian tensions in the kingdom's volatile Eastern Province is rapidly increasing. The recent rash of attacks targeting Saudi security forces suggests that the Islamic State is intensifying its campaign in the kingdom. Nevertheless, the scale and scope of its operations targeting Shi`a in Eastern Province indicates that the Islamic State will continue to prioritize the targeting and killing of Shi`a, including civilians, in its campaign to destabilize and eventually destroy the Saudi monarchy.

It is worth noting that the recent expansion of operations by the Islamic State against targets outside of Eastern Province has involved small-scale operations directed specifically against Saudi security forces in contrast to its apparent emphasis on striking soft civilian targets such as Shi`a mosques and public gatherings of Shi`a worshippers. While the Islamic State has not shied away from attacking and killing Sunni civilians in other theaters, this targeting strategy may be designed to limit Sunni civilian deaths in the kingdom in order to minimize any potential repercussions from the Sunni majority it seeks to cultivate. Taken together, these developments portend a period of potentially unprecedented instability in the foreseeable future. At the same time, the authoritarian model that typifies the monarchy is firmly entrenched and resilient, even as it contends with an array of domestic and regional concerns and unprecedented economic troubles stemming from low oil prices and declining foreign exchange reserves. Despite this reality, the Islamic State will nevertheless continue to set its sights, however unrealistic, on toppling the royal family. **CTC**

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The Jihadi Threat to Scotland: Caledonian Exceptionalism and its Limits

By Stefano Bonino

A fragile time in the history of Western-Islamic relationships, particularly given the global threat posed by the Islamic State and the unprecedented number of European Muslims who have traveled to conflict zones in the Middle East, the comparatively fewer problems Scotland has experienced with violent radicalization are worthy of study. One explanation is that the nature of Scotland's body politic and the orientation of its policies—in some ways similar to Canada's—have reduced the appeal of grievance-based jihadi propaganda. An economically better off and more upwardly mobile group of south Asian immigrants settled in Scotland compared to England, spreading across the country and fostering relatively harmonious relationships with the wider society. Yet, pockets of Islamist extremism, the Islamic State's global political allure and distortion of Islam to spread its worldview, and ongoing concerns about ultra-orthodox elements in the Pakistani community suggest that Scotland is far from immune to the threat of violent jihadism.

The rise of the Islamic State, the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and the recent attacks on Paris and Brussels have heightened the threat springing from international terrorism in the United Kingdom, which raised its threat level to "severe" in August 2014 and still stands at the same level 20 months later.¹ The radicalization of young British Muslims has been explained in multiple forms, ranging from an explosive mixture of ideology, grievance, and mobilization² to personal vulnerabilities and discontent over foreign policy.³ Several studies have focused on the English Muslim community, while the situation of Muslims living in Scotland has been relegated to a dimly lit corner of research.

There are lessons that counterterrorism experts can learn from Scotland. Some trans-Atlantic similarities emerge between Scotland and Canada and explain how a social democratic politics with relaxed attitudes toward immigration and less aggressive foreign policies is attractive to Muslim communities, potentially reducing the appeal of grievance-based jihadi propaganda. The peculiar so-

cial and economic environment, which Scottish Muslims inhabit, seems to, at least partially, steer communities away from propaganda that seeks to draw into its ranks alienated, disenfranchised, and dissatisfied young individuals. But while Scotland has managed to engage in a successful process of community cohesion, which is built around an inclusive sense of Scottishness, there remain questions as to whether the allure of violent Islamism is reduced or simply hidden. The existence of Islamist movements with an ambiguous stance toward violence, the global appeal of the Islamic State's religious messaging and viscerally anti-Western ideology, and recent scandals engulfing some ultra-orthodox Scottish-Pakistani community leaders call for caution when assessing long-term trends.

An Inclusive Social and Economic Landscape

The socio-economic background of the Muslim community living in Scotland is the first element that plays in favor of community cohesion and that lessens the impact of grievance-based jihadi propaganda. Scottish Pakistanis, who make up almost 60 percent⁴ of the total Scottish Muslim population, trace their roots to the relatively well-off Punjab. Conversely, many Pakistanis who migrated to England between the mid-1940s and the late 1950s originate from poorer Mirpur in Pakistan. The Scottish Muslim population is also fairly small. It numbers around 77,000 people, about 1.4 percent of the total Scottish population,⁵ making it relatively easy for local authorities to address social grievances and for law enforcement agencies to monitor risky individuals. Ethnic segregation is very limited, especially in comparison to England. Aside from Pollokshields and Govanhill in Glasgow,⁶ there are no predominantly Muslim neighborhoods in Scotland. Moreover, the Scottish Pakistani tradition of self-employment has led to low job competition with the Scottish white majority. Today, Scottish Pakistanis make up the highest proportion of self-employed people among all minority ethnic groups in Scotland⁷ and have higher employment rates than English Pakistanis in London, North West England, and East of England.⁸ Overall, Scottish Pakistanis have sown the seeds for economic success in the country and have offered a public image as a hard-working community, bestowing on younger generations a future of relative financial stability.

In the current political climate, it is important to note that Muslims in Scotland have stayed out of major trouble. The 1988-1989 Rushdie Affair-related disturbances and the riots in England in 2001 and 2011 were not mirrored by similar violent actions in Scotland. The small Scottish Muslim community certainly has a limited capacity to mobilize on streets compared to its English counterpart. The English riots were also a result of context-specific, fragile relationships⁹ between local ethnic minorities in the cities involved and the white community, including the police.¹⁰ However, it is undisputable that a lack of violent street protests and riots has had a widely positive effect on community relations in Scotland. Surveys by Ipsos MORI in 2010¹¹ and the Scottish Government in 2011¹² demon-

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strated that Scots largely consider Muslims to be part and parcel of the wider community. Muslims also share the civic ethos enshrined in Scottish nationalism and profess to uphold strong Scottish identities.¹³ Hostilities toward English people living in Scotland have displaced some anti-Muslim prejudice.¹⁴ Meanwhile, religious sectarianism between Protestants and Catholics in Scotland has often steered prejudice toward the “Irish question”¹⁵ rather than the settlement of predominantly South Asian, Muslim communities. The lack of an established neo-fascist tradition in Scotland is palpable in the invisibility of the Scottish Defence League (SDL), the offshoot division of the English Defence League.

The support that the English Defence League has garnered in England since it was formed in 2009 to respond to an anti-Afghanistan War demonstration organized by the now proscribed extremist Islamist group Al-Muhajiroun has never been replicated by the SDL in Scotland. Extremist Islamist groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun, and leading preachers, such as Omar Bakri Muhammad who radicalized many English Muslims in the 1990s and 2000s, historically failed to find widespread support in Scotland.¹⁶ Overall, a positive social and economic landscape has facilitated the development of a fairly successful Muslim community, in turn lessening the attractiveness of grievance-based jihadi propaganda.

A “Minority-Friendly” Political Context

The Scottish government has often aligned itself with political stances and causes that are very palatable to the Muslim community, further reducing the appeal of grievance-based jihadi propa-

ganda. With a mixture of astuteness and stubborn contrarian attitude toward anything perceived to be English, the government has managed to keep a lid on those feelings of anger that have troubled a section of the English Muslim community and that have been directed toward Westminster. The Scottish National Party (SNP), Scotland’s governing party since 2011, has used its historical opposition to the Iraq War¹⁷ to win Muslim support. Many Muslims switched their support from Labour to the SNP in 2003¹⁸ and ideologically joined the political stance of Scottish nationalists. The nomination of Humza Yousaf as the first-ever Muslim Minister in the Scottish government in 2012 and the fact that the small Scottish Muslim community boasts both the first Muslim Member of Parliament, Mohammad Sarwar in 1997,¹⁹ and the first Muslim councillor, Bashir Maan in 1970,²⁰ in Great Britain, are often cited as evidence that the Scottish body politic is particularly Muslim friendly. The Scottish government’s stances in favor of Syrian refugees²¹ and Russian president Vladimir Putin²² and in opposition to Prime Minister David Cameron,²³ air strikes in Syria,²⁴ Israel,²⁵ and the Trident nuclear program²⁶ demonstrate that what divides Scottish and English polities conversely unites Muslims and the Scots.

The socialist egalitarianism that is propounded in Scotland draws inspiration from a historical sense of oppression at the hands of the English “rulers” and a not-too-subtle anti-British agenda. Having expressed, and sometimes possibly exploited, global feelings of victimhood, Muslim communities in Scotland often join in the Scots on the “oppression caravan” and anti-imperialism campaign. Muslims’ strong belonging to Scotland is as much a result



Then Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond comforts a member of the Muslim community at the Central Mosque in Glasgow, U.K., on July 1, 2007, after a terrorist attack at Glasgow airport.

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of positive life experiences as it is a consequence of a marriage of mutual convenience. Scotland's progressive politics and civic nationalism manifest themselves in an "aspirational pluralism"²⁷ that allow political elites to market an institutional inclusivity, which is favored by a lack of Muslim minority claims for multifaithism and multilingualism²⁸ that could otherwise risk fracturing public opinion.

While many of the factors explaining the harmonious relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims are very unique to Scottish recent history, their underlying principles are to be found in a social democratic politics with a positive attitude toward settled immigrants and less 'aggressive' foreign policies. Across the Atlantic, these principles are well mirrored by Canada, particularly so under the new leadership of the Liberal Party led by Justin Trudeau. The multicultural ethos of the Scottish government closely resembles Canadian politics, which has managed to foster some of the highest levels of Muslim integration.²⁹ The pledge made by the Scottish government to withdraw nuclear weapons, yet enter NATO, should the 2014 Independence Referendum had succeeded, resonates with the Canadian experience of abandoning its nuclear arsenal in 1984 while remaining a full member of NATO.³⁰ Canadian refusal to partake in the Iraq War and a primarily non-militaristic approach to the current war against the Islamic State³¹ show striking similarities with Scottish political attitudes toward war. Notably, "the 'small n' Canadian nationalism of the 1970s onward: welcoming, inclusive, peaceful"³² brings about images of today's Scottish nationalism, with its power to alienate English elites and win Muslim hearts.

While the spectre of populism looms behind any type of nationalism, and the SNP has ostensibly embraced anti-British positions, the political stance taken by the party have undoubtedly gained unprecedented domestic support from the Scottish Muslim population. Arguably, domestic and foreign policies should consider longer-term, wider national and geopolitical dynamics and interests. However, for local exercises of community cohesion and the prevention of violent extremism, the Scottish government could not find any better marketing tool to draw Muslims into their ideological ranks than to oppose many of the policies rolled out by the disliked London elites. Being Scottish "because we are not English" may well be the new badge of identity for a generation of Scottish Muslims, who are disenfranchised by a political system that they perceive to be concentrated in the faraway palaces of power in London. Overall, Scottish political astuteness could well help to starve violent Islamist recruiters of the oxygen that they need to turn young Muslims against Scottish society.

Only a tiny minority of the around 800 U.K. citizens who joined the Syrian conflict have traveled from Scotland.³³ Recently, senior Police Scotland officers claimed that, notwithstanding the severe threat faced by the United Kingdom, Scotland and its communities are not at risk of an immediate Islamist terrorist attack.³⁴ The prominent case of Aberdonian student Yousif Badri, who was arrested in June 2013 but was cleared of terrorism charges two years later, is a good example.³⁵ The political response to the bombings of Glasgow Airport in 2007 was controversial, yet some would argue it was shrewd. Former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond offered the world a unique example of political astuteness by voicing a call for unity from Glasgow Central Mosque.³⁶ Today, almost 10 years after the terrorist attacks, Scottish Muslims still remember Salmond's pledge of solidarity. Current Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon followed on Salmond's footsteps by delivering her trib-

"The lack of a sustained backlash against Muslim communities after the Glasgow bombing was peculiar. Increased intolerance against Muslims certainly followed the incident, but the communities soon resumed their normal lives."

ute to the victims of the Paris attacks in November 2015 from the same mosque.³⁷ The lack of a sustained backlash against Muslim communities after the Glasgow bombing was peculiar. Increased intolerance against Muslims certainly followed the incident,³⁸ but the communities soon resumed their normal lives. The fact that the perpetrators were neither Scottish-born nor Scottish residents washed off any sense of group responsibility, while the lack of public appeal of anti-Muslim street organizations reduced the likelihood of an explosion in inter-community tensions.

A Limited Backlash against Security Measures

Security measures at airports and on the street remain a key tool in preventing terrorism and apprehending suspects. In Scotland, Muslim reactions to these measures have been mixed. Some have lamented checks at Scottish airports to be disproportionately directed toward their community,³⁹ although there are no publicly available statistics to support or disprove these claims. In 2011, some prominent members of the community went as far as to boycott Glasgow International Airport.⁴⁰

Conversely, stop-and-search activities on streets have treated Muslims in a fair manner. Unlike in England, where the Equality and Human Rights Commission claims that black and ethnic minorities are disproportionately stopped and searched,⁴¹ there is no evidence that the same has happened in Scotland.⁴² Scholars⁴³ posit that Police Scotland have overused non-statutory stops and searches and disproportionately targeted young people rather than minorities per se. Despite the furor that stop-and-search activities on Scottish streets have caused,⁴⁴ they have not fueled particular discontent from the Muslim community. Workshops jointly organized by the Muslim Council of Scotland and Police Scotland for religious personnel and mosque representatives, in light of the global and national threat posed by Islamist terrorism, have allowed security operators to enter delicate spaces and develop best practices to counter the ideologies of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State in partnership with local Muslim communities.⁴⁵

The Limits of Scottish Exceptionalism

While Scotland might not experience the scale of threat faced by some other Western countries, it is not immune to violent Islamist radicalization. Across Western countries, it is not just grievances and a sense of alienation from mainstream society that have driven violent radicalization and terrorist recruitment. The distortion of Islamic teachings and the political use of religion by the Islamic State and likeminded groups have also played a key role in enticing young people to adopt their worldview.

The knowledge gaps in Police Scotland's counterterrorism strat-

egy recently exposed by the Scottish Police Authority (SPA) demonstrate that the risks of a potential terrorist attack in the country should not be underestimated.⁴⁶ While the spectacle of terrorism is likely to hit major European cities hosting disenfranchised Muslim communities, the possibility that Islamist militants will strike against Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, or Dundee in the future should not be ruled out. This warning was recently echoed by Police Scotland.⁴⁷ Aside from the Glasgow bombings, publicly known high-profile incidents include the cases of Glaswegian Aqsa Mahmood, who fled to Syria and turned into a recruiter for the Islamic State in 2013,⁴⁸ Aberdonian Abdul Rakib Amin, who joined the Islamic State in 2014 and was killed in a drone strike conducted by the Royal Air Force in Syria one year later,⁴⁹ and a mysterious Glaswegian woman who was allegedly ready to carry out a terrorist attack in August last year.⁵⁰

Long-term, more subtle threats could be posed by groups that may exploit Scottish tolerance and hands-off approach to ambiguous Islamist ideologies. For instance, some critics have questioned the former relationships of government with the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB).⁵¹ The MAB has connections with the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵² Opinion about the Muslim Brotherhood in the West is split.^a The more pessimist perspectives include a recent expert submission to the U.K. Cabinet Office, which alleges that the group may endanger social cohesion, maintains ambivalent positions toward violence, and carries out fundraising efforts for Hamas.⁵³

Controversies have also surrounded some prominent Muslim initiatives and institutions. The Scottish Islamic Foundation, a group launched in 2008 to promote community cohesion and active citizenship,⁵⁴ closed its doors four years later amid claims of ineffectiveness.⁵⁵ In another instance, an investigation recently conducted by the Scottish Charity Regulator called into question the activities of Scotland's biggest mosque, Glasgow Central Mosque. The investigation unveiled that mosque managers had funneled £50,000 to the European headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat, a revivalist Sunni movement, in Dewsbury, England, in 2011.⁵⁶ In a struggle to change the internal operations of the mosque and reform old-fashioned cultural attitudes toward women, the younger generations of Muslims that briefly took control of management in mid-2014⁵⁷ have faced resistance and scorn from the conservative, orthodox elements of the older Pakistani community.⁵⁸ Recent revelations that Habib ur Rehman, the imam of the mosque, had defined Mumtaz Qadri's murder of former Governor of Punjab in Pakistan, Salman Taseer, for alleged blasphemy, "the collective responsibility of the ummah" have raised fresh concerns about the ultra-orthodox sections of the community.⁵⁹ These concerns are heightened by allegations of links between two senior figures at Glasgow Central Mosque and Edinburgh Polwarth Mosque and Sipah-e-Sahaba, a

U.K.-proscribed violent group operating in Pakistan.⁶⁰ Last month's murder of Asad Shah,⁶¹ a Glaswegian Ahmadiyya Muslim shopkeeper, at the hands of a Muslim man from Bradford, England, due to Shah's adherence to Ahmadi beliefs,⁶² has added fuel to intra-community sectarian and cultural tensions. The death threats that Aamer Anwar, a prominent Scottish Pakistani human rights lawyer, received after condemning violence and calling for unity in Scotland⁶³ encapsulate the complexities of this divide.

Amid police investigations into terror links,⁶⁴ fears of sectarian violence,⁶⁵ political support for Aamer Anwar,⁶⁶ and appeals for tolerance issued by the Muslim Council of Scotland and Glasgow Central Mosque,⁶⁷ public calls for unity and rejection of violence are extremely important. Today, the message that Khalid Latif, the New York Police Department (NYPD)'s Muslim chaplain, gave to the Scottish community in 2014 is more important than ever. Speaking in Edinburgh at an event organized by the Scottish Police Muslim Association, Latif encouraged Scottish Muslim leaders to be more vocal in their opposition to the Islamic State and other jihadi terrorist groups.⁶⁸ This approach recognizes that the Muslim-friendly Scottish body politic can only keep a lid on grievances. Yet, it does not tackle the ideological rejection of Western modernity and the skillful manipulation of Islamic teachings that make the Islamic State's narrative so attractive to young Muslims across Western societies. This tainted narrative requires both credible religious and community members to deliver sound counter-narratives to local communities and the gradual empowerment of the younger, more liberal Scottish-born section of the Muslim community.

Conclusion

Scotland sits within a multinational state, the United Kingdom, which is a key target for a major terrorist attack.⁶⁹ However, Scotland hosts a relatively integrated Muslim community that has managed to foster rather harmonious relationships with the wider society, including law enforcement agencies. Scottish Muslims have demonstrated that community cohesion within a nation united along civic, rather than ethnic, lines is possible.

The "Scottish exceptionalism" of successful Muslim integration certainly has much to do with a social democratic political orientation that is particularly attractive to minorities. Yet Scotland's political landscape has also heightened ongoing fractures with England in a game of tribalism that has kept a lid on violent extremism but, at the same time, has turned a blind eye to the potential long-term consequences of maintaining a soft approach toward radicalism. Scotland's extreme tolerance could prove to be a fertile ground for the development of Islamist movements, which may not exploit deep-rooted sociopolitical grievances but may take forward anti-Western rhetoric, an ideological rejection of modernity, and distorted interpretations of Islam. Ultimately, the outcomes of the ongoing rift within the more orthodox and more liberal sections of the Scottish Pakistani community will trace the trajectory of the Scottish Muslim community of the future. **CTC**

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The Islamic State's Pyramid Scheme: Egyptian Expansion and the Giza Governorate Cell

By Mokhtar Awad

With a presence in Libya and the Sinai secured, the Islamic State is taking steps to destabilize mainland Egypt by steadily making inroads in the vast Western Desert, Upper Egypt, and Greater Cairo. A new network of Islamic State-affiliated cells that has been operating in Giza is the latest effort to bring armed insurgency closer to the capital and Nile Valley, where disparate amateur militant groups have ineffectually operated in recent years. Thus far, the Islamic State has struggled greatly in advancing its Egypt agenda due to a lack of in-country resources and experienced recruits as well as the relative strength of Egyptian security services. However, given recent trends, there is a real possibility in the coming years that the Islamic State could consolidate mainland militants' efforts and escalate insurgency in mainland Egypt.

Early 18 months after the Islamic State injected itself into the Egyptian jihadi landscape by securing the *bay`a* of the Sinai-based Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), the contours of an Islamic State expansion strategy in the Egyptian mainland are becoming clearer. The Islamic State has escalated activity in the Western Desert, Upper Egypt, and found new cells in the Greater Cairo area. The group is exploiting its Egypt presence to project terror by targeting Western interests as part of its broader external operations campaign. It is also steadily laying the groundwork for a mainland insurgency to link the Libyan and Sinai theaters and to consolidate control over a fragmented Nile Valley militant landscape made up of al-Qa`ida-aligned militants and violent actors associated with some factions inside the Muslim Brotherhood and their Islamist supporters.¹ An Islamic State cell that surfaced in the Giza governorate last September, which this paper will focus on in detail, is the first effort made thus far by the group to bring armed insurgency closer to Cairo.

The Islamic State has struggled to execute this strategy, yielding mixed results with no shortage of spectacular failures. The lack of abundant local resources and experienced recruits in the Nile Valley, along with the relative strength of the Egyptian security services, has hindered the group's designs. Nevertheless, if its strategy succeeds, the results could be devastating for Egypt's security, economy, and for the region.

This article is informed in part by Egyptian State Security in-

vestigations obtained by the author, Islamic State statements, militants' social media profiles, and open-source reporting.

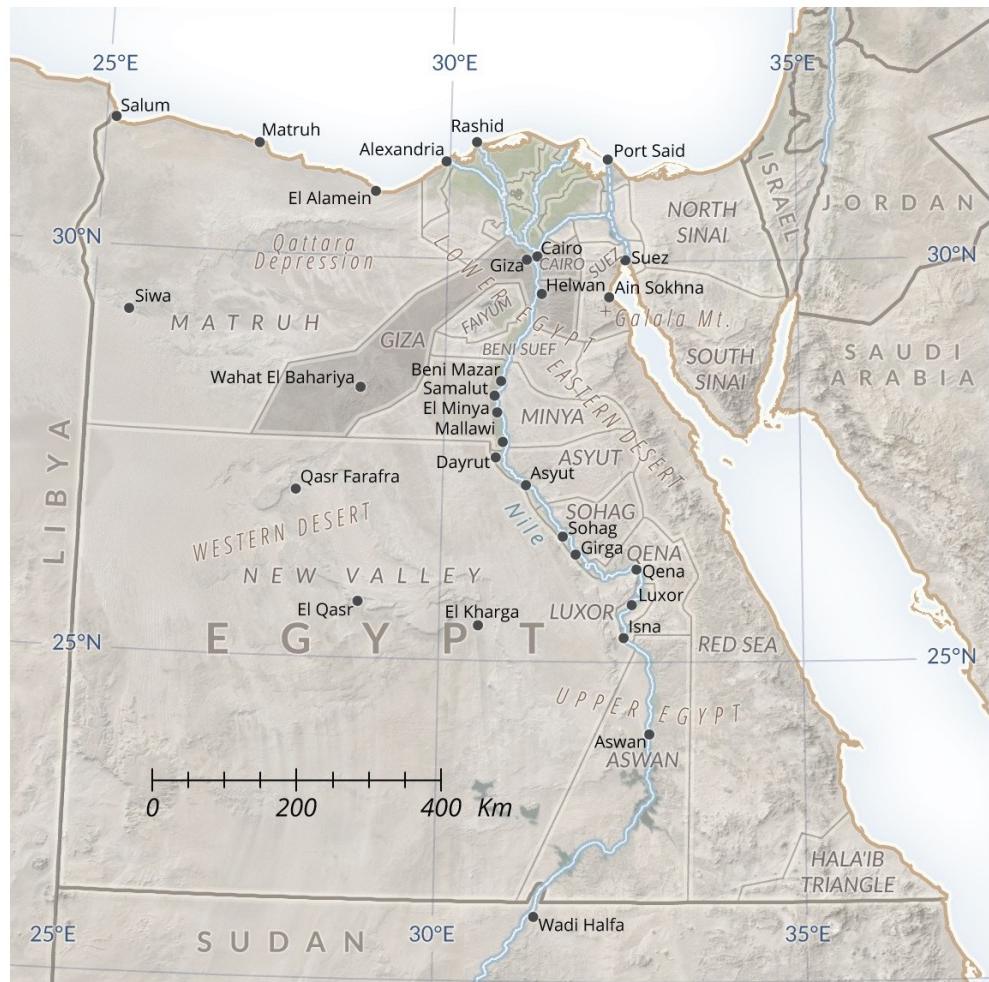
A Poisoned Chalice?

The Islamic State was able to pursue this nationwide strategy after it subsumed ABM, which changed its name to Wilayat Sinai, or Sinai Province. It has since increasingly played an outsized role in influencing the strategic direction and ideology of the affiliate to serve its regional and global agenda.²

Last August, this author wrote a co-authored article in this publication that ABM's allegiance to the Islamic State could prove to be a "poisoned chalice," as the local group—despite its military strength in the Sinai—might in the long-term meet the same fate of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which forsook its base of popular support when it became part of al-Qa`ida.³

While the jury is out about the future fortunes of ABM, it is clear the Islamic State has gained from the merger as it is now able to use its Sinai host as a launching pad to reproduce in mainland Egypt and project terror. Wilayat Sinai's Nile Valley operatives, cultivated by ABM since 2011, and a new crop of Islamic State mainland recruits now do the direct bidding of the group. And the integration of ABM into the Caliphate project provided the Islamic State with a new front to launch international terrorism. Wilayat Sinai's downing of a Russian airliner over the Sinai in October 2015 killed 224, mostly Russian civilians.⁴ The attack may end up benefiting the Islamic State more than its Egyptian affiliate. In downing the Russian aircraft, Wilayat Sinai, which had long avoided mass civilian casualties to nurture its base of popular support, killed far more civilians than its previous four-plus years of activity combined. The group has also killed far greater numbers of local Sinai civilians in 2015 than previous years, for the first time targeting them with Islamic State-like abandon,⁵ risking a backlash from local tribes. Killing civilians in the mainland and harming the economy and livelihoods by attacks on tourism may also trigger a backlash from potentially supportive constituencies.⁶

Wilayat Sinai's November 2014 *bay`a* came at a particularly weak point for the group's Nile Valley cells, which were already suffering from decapitation by authorities. After it joined the Islamic State fold, these cells were further degraded by Egyptian security services and the group's Nile Valley operations were further weakened by defections by al-Qa`ida loyalists.⁷ The most significant defector was former special forces officer Hisham Ashmawy, who would later proclaim his command over al-Murabitun, a Libya-based, al-Qa`ida-affiliated group.⁸ Ashmawy was believed to have commanded cells in the mainland that after his defection were taken over by another senior leader in Wilayat Sinai, 33-year-old Giza resident Ashraf al-Gharably.⁹ Al-Gharably would become the Islamic State's key lieutenant in executing its plan for mainland Egypt beginning in 2015.



Map 1: Egypt within the larger region

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Early Expansion on the Mainland

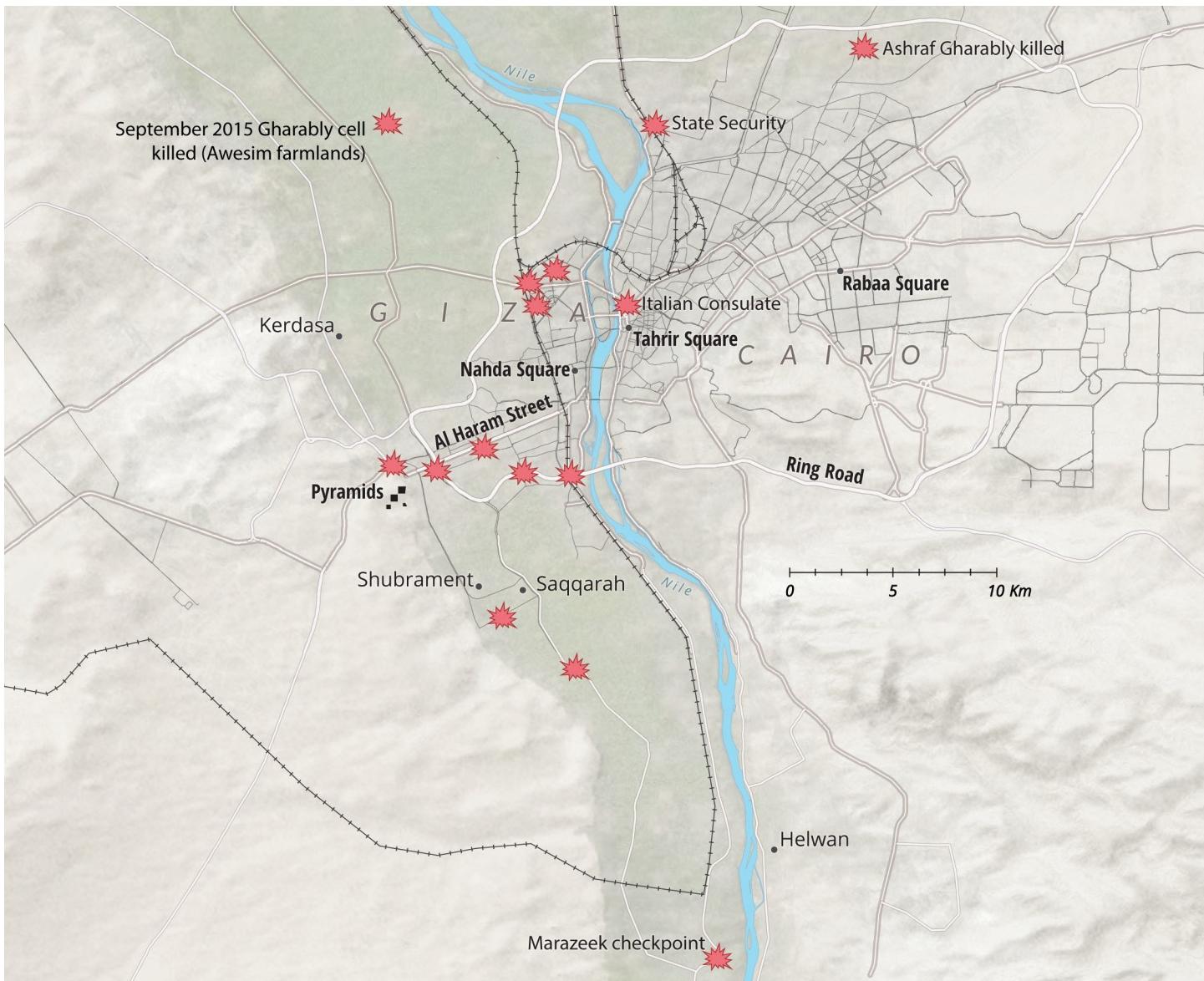
In the run up to the November 2014 Islamic State *bay`a*, ABM had begun to make inroads into Egypt's Western Desert by carrying out several attacks in summer 2014, and clashed with authorities in the Galala Mountain in the desert east of Cairo in September 2014.¹⁰ In October 2014, the military revealed that it destroyed a small jihadi encampment southeast of el-Wahat el-Bahariya in Giza governorate.¹¹ ABM only took credit for most of the Western Desert attacks after the Islamic State *bay`a*,¹² raising the possibility that ABM's Western Desert expansion may have been connected to the Islamic State *bay`a* deal. The Islamic State stood the most to gain, as it wished to secure smuggling routes in and out of Libya and to lay the groundwork for future militant activity.

But not much took place outside the Sinai following the Islamic State *bay`a*, and it was unclear if al-Gharably, once he took over from Ashmawy, would be able to regroup. For much of early 2015 it did not seem to be the case. But in analyzing new information obtained from State Security investigation files and open source reporting on claimed and suspected Islamic State activity in the mainland in 2015, it becomes clear that al-Gharably was planning what he had hoped would be a spectacular comeback to be unleashed in a dizzying succession of attacks last summer to destabilize Egypt significantly.

On June 10, 2015, al-Gharably allegedly dispatched three militants in an attempt to blow up the Karnak Temple in Luxor in

Upper Egypt (the country's south).¹³ Thanks to locals' vigilance, the jihadis were quickly spotted and neutralized. Two of them had suicide vests, machine guns, hand grenades, and allegedly an RPG. State Security investigations revealed that the two would-be suicide bombers were allegedly from Tunisia and Sudan.¹⁴ The 12-member cell that helped facilitate the attack was based in the Upper Egypt province of Beni Suef.¹⁵ It is unclear if the two suspects came into Egypt from Libya or Sinai, but the alleged involvement of two foreign fighters suggests a new transnational dimension to the group's personnel in the mainland. It may have been foreign Islamic State operatives were used because they had fewer qualms killing civilians in a suicide attack. The Islamic State never claimed responsibility for the foiled plot, which if successful, might have devastated Egypt's economy early on in the year and killed untold numbers of tourists.

Islamic State mainland cells, commanded by al-Gharably, then executed a rapid succession of plots in the months that followed, according to Egyptian authorities.¹⁶ On July 11, the Italian consulate in Cairo was bombed.¹⁷ On July 15, a rare SVBIED in the mainland targeted a military installation on a major highway east of Cairo but failed to reach its target.¹⁸ On August 12, a Croatian oil worker who had been kidnapped a month earlier was beheaded by the group.¹⁹ On August 20, the State Security building in Shubra el-Kheima, part of Greater Cairo, was bombed using a powerful VBIED.²⁰ In September, an assassination attempt against the State Security



Map 2: The approximate location of attacks by fighters affiliated with the Islamic State and major security raids since last summer

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Prosecution's general attorney, Tamer Firjani, was thwarted.²¹ The Islamic State did not claim involvement in the foiled plot, but authorities alleged that the cell worked with the group.²²

Activity also escalated in the Western Desert when the Islamic State, after comfortably establishing itself in neighboring Libya, declared for the first time its presence in the Western Desert by issuing a statement with photos in fall 2015.²³ Some clashes with unidentified militants took place early in 2015 and in the summer near Siwa Oasis, some of whom authorities alleged were veteran fighters from Sinai dispatched to the Western Desert.²⁴ On September 12, Islamic State militants kidnapped a Bedouin desert tracker from Wahat el Bahriya, Giza, who worked with the military.²⁵ In the ensuing two days, the Islamic State executed him and engaged Egyptian forces that were sent to sweep the area looking for the man. In the midst of the chaos, an Egyptian Apache helicopter pilot mistakenly fired on a group of Mexican tourists and Egyptians, killing at least 12.²⁶

The most intense battle waged by Egyptian security services oc-

curred in the desert west of Upper Egypt in late September 2015 against an Islamic State force that the military said had crossed from Libya.²⁷ The battle took place reportedly some 30 km west of Asyut in an area called Dayrut Mountain, where the militants were camped out.²⁸ Elite military and police units were flown to the area and, with close air support, destroyed the camp and reportedly killed at least 10 militants and detained at least one. Some of these were allegedly foreign fighters.²⁹ The incident revealed that the Islamic State may be planning to secure a foothold in the mountains and hills of Egypt's deep south overlooking the Nile Valley, following in the footsteps of Gamma Islamiya in the 1980s-1990s.

In the fall of 2015 the Nile Valley Islamic State Jihadis lost their momentum. In late September, the Islamic State's mainland operations suffered a major blow when in a raid in Giza authorities killed nine militants they alleged were under the command of al-Gharably and were behind all of the 2015 Cairo bombings mentioned above.³⁰ Al-Gharably himself was killed by police in northeast Cairo in No-

vember, an area where jihadis have also operated.^{31a} A fake ID for a petroleum company with operations in the Western Desert was found on his person, which he likely used to clear checkpoints in the area.³² As al-Gharably's network suffered these setbacks, new cells made up of fresh Islamic State recruits whose loyalty is only to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi rose in their stead. They have shown a greater ambition to wage armed insurgency near Cairo and start to link the Western Desert with the capital and beyond, yet suffer from lack of experience and capability because of the decapitation of many of the former ABM Nile Valley operatives like al-Gharably.

The Giza Governorate Cell

In September 2015, a new Islamic State cell claimed responsibility for its first IED attack. The bomb targeted a Ministry of Foreign Affairs satellite building in the Mohandisn district of Giza, which resulted in two injuries and damage to the exterior facade.³³

How the Islamic State Giza cell came to be helps shed light on the evolving jihadi dynamics in the Nile Valley. Unlike al-Gharably's by now largely defunct Islamic State cells, which were leftovers from joint ventures between mainland jihadists and ABM, the available evidence indicates that the Giza governorate cell may have some overlaps with militants from groups such as Ajnad Misr, a pro-al-Qa'ida jihadi group operating on the mainland, that defected to the Islamic State.

Ajnad Misr had dominated the insurgent jihadi landscape in the Greater Cairo area, specifically Giza, before the Islamic State came onto the scene.³⁴ But it suffered successive blows from authorities when its leader, Hamam Attiya, an ex-ABM operative who left the group early on to focus on the Nile Valley, was killed in April 2015.³⁵

Even though mainland Egypt had long been turf for al-Qa'ida-leaning jihadis, the group and its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian native, failed to exploit this fact. Frustration with these shortcomings, in light of the spectacular successes of the Islamic State, was enough for some pro-al-Qa'ida elements in the Nile Valley to put aside ideological differences and join fledgling Islamic State-linked cells in the area. One of them was likely a lieutenant of Attiya's whose *kunya* was Malik Al Ameer Atta. Ajnad Misr had confirmed that he left its group for some other jihadi endeavor when police killed him along with an associate in a Giza City apartment on July 27, 2015.³⁶

It is not clear what Atta was up to, but the day following his killing, a drive-by shooting by militants killed one guard protecting the Niger Embassy just after midnight of July 28, 2015.³⁷ It was first assumed to be an Ajnad Misr retaliation, but it turned out that the perpetrators, all youth, revealed, after being arrested the following week, that they had given *bay'a* to the Islamic State.³⁸ The timing raises the possibility that the cell was working with Atta. Egypt's State Security, after conducting investigations, alleged that the suspects had trained on a farm owned by an Islamic State fighter who had returned from Syria.³⁹ It remains unclear if the Islamic State

"Even though mainland Egypt had long been turf for al-Qa'ida-leaning jihadis, the group and its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian native, failed to exploit this fact. Frustration with these shortcomings was enough for some pro-al-Qa'ida elements in the Nile Valley to put aside ideological differences and join fledgling Islamic State-linked cells in the area."

had a hand in it or if a local cell was simply auditioning to win approval from the group.

The day of the Niger embassy attack, a pro-Islamic State group calling itself the Ansar Battalions in Giza popped up on Twitter.⁴⁰ They posted a video in August 2015 that prominently displayed scenes from Islamic State videos and vowed they would launch attacks.⁴¹ Nothing has been heard from them since. The following month, the Islamic State's Giza cell would post the first claim of responsibility for an attack, which suggests that the Ansar Battalions had either joined the budding Islamic State cell or morphed into it.

By April 2016 the new Islamic State Giza cell, or network of cells, had claimed responsibility for at least 11 security incidents and attacks since September 2015 (see Map 2) that left at least 13 policemen and four civilians dead in the governorate. But most of these attacks do not measure up to the Islamic State brand. In fact, these specific Soldiers of the Caliphate are perhaps the ineptest ever to carry the group's banner. They have exaggerated and flat out lied about the nature of their attacks and how many they have killed. This is most likely because the cell contains novices. For this reason and a "home-turf" advantage in the Nile Valley not enjoyed in the Sinai, security services have been able to arrest a significant number of cell members and extract information on their safe-houses and networks.

The Topology of Terror

There is no one answer as to why Giza governorate, an Islamist stronghold since at least the 1950-1960s,⁴² was selected as a staging ground for Islamic State insurgency in the mainland. But analyzing the geography is instructive (see Map 1). The Giza province is huge, almost the size of Jordan. It has an urban core in the southwest of greater Cairo most are familiar with, but it is mostly rural. Giza's farmlands hug the southern boundaries of the Delta to the north. It protrudes deep into the desert and its oases to the west, and to the south it expands into Upper Egypt on both the east and west banks of the Nile. This is thanks to largely illogical boundary-drawing by Cairo, but still largely represents the dynamics inside the governorate.

If there was an Egyptian Mason-Dixon line, it would cut right through Giza. Many immigrants from Upper Egypt have settled in the south of Giza governorate, bringing with them a conservative

a Al-Gharably was killed in the northeast district of Al Marj, which is close to Musturod, Khosos, Arab Sharkas, Ain Shams, and Matariya, which have witnessed attacks pre-2015 by ABM/Islamic State-affiliated cells and are strongholds of the Muslim Brotherhood. Militants' presence and operations in such areas in north and northeast Cairo, in Giza to the west of Cairo, and Helwan to the south effectively form a belt around the capital. See Ahmad Moustafa, "Increased presence of militants in residential districts," *Al Hayat*, February 4, 2016.

culture that tolerates guns and vendettas. The farmlands border a desert where weapons and drug smugglers, as well as bandits, have long operated. All are ideal staging grounds and hospitable environments for jihadis wishing to strike anywhere in the Greater Cairo area and secure a presence in a corridor that links the historical smuggling routes between Libya and Sinai.

The other relevant factor is perhaps the recent history of violence between Islamists and the state. In Giza's Nahda square, at least 87 Islamist protesters and two policemen were killed on the same day Rabaa square was cleared in August 2013.⁴³ Islamists looked for revenge, and in the village of Kerdasa, at least a dozen policemen were brutally murdered and their bodies mutilated by a pro-Brotherhood mob.⁴⁴ Police effectively lost control of the village before retaking it a month later following clashes.⁴⁵

Some violence also took place in Giza governorate during the 1980s-1990s insurgency. More recently areas of Giza City and the governorates hinterlands have been the home base of Salafist supporters of the former presidential candidate Sheikh Hazem Salah Abu Ismail—called Hazemoon⁴⁶—many of whom traveled to join jihadist groups like the Islamic State or engaged in militancy at home. Giza Salafis have also been especially violent, for instance, inciting the lynching of four Shiites in June 2013.⁴⁷

Leadership and Tactics

According to ongoing State Security investigations, a 22-year-old called Ibrahim A. is one of the suspected leaders of the Giza cell.⁴⁸ It is alleged that he contacted a Sinai-based Islamic State operative by the name of Abu Baseer, who authorized the cell. At least six others were detained in recent months, most of them in their twenties with backgrounds ranging from high school and university students to a barber and a pharmaceutical sales representative.⁴⁹ An electrical engineer believed to have been a chief bomb-maker for the cell was arrested in late February 2016.⁵⁰ State Security also reportedly believes that the network may include anywhere from 30 to 40 jihadis.⁵¹

The amateur nature of the Islamic State Giza cell cannot be overlooked. Some of the “attacks” are simply absurd stunts, yet they still raise important questions. One example is when the Islamic State claimed that its “soldiers” had attacked Jews in a hotel near the Pyramids in Giza in early January 2016, answering Caliph Abu Bakr’s call to kill Jews.⁵² The actual incident, as eyewitness and security camera footage revealed,⁵³ involved dozens of mostly teenage militants, armed with flares, fireworks, a few Molotov cocktails, and locally produced birdshot mobbing an empty tourist bus in front of a hotel. The assailants looked identical to typical local Brotherhood and Islamist protesters who use the same weapons and tactics in clashes with police, raising questions if they were perhaps unwittingly manipulated by Islamic State operatives looking to recruit them. There were no casualties and the targeted Jews turned out to be mainly Muslim Israeli Arabs. Yet the group still falsely claimed

Jewish fatalities.^b

At least five of the group’s attacks and attempted attacks have involved IEDs of various sizes, most of which were spotted by civilians and defused by police. One target in mid-October 2015 was in front of a hotel directly opposite the Pyramids.⁵⁴ It was about a week before Wilayat Sinai downed a Russian plane. A small explosion injured at least two policemen while attempting to defuse it. The repercussions would have been large if even a small attack had occurred near Egypt’s number-one tourist attraction.

IEDs have also targeted diplomatic and government buildings as well as police checkpoints on major roads such as the Cairo’s Ring Road, the capital’s beltway, which has numerous police checkpoints (see Map 2). A successful spree of shootings and IEDs on the road could have serious repercussions on the capital and the population’s sense of safety. Thankfully, the Giza cell has not perfected its targeting as of yet. One IED targeted a decommissioned checkpoint, another was defused, and one armed assault killed two workers of the Roads and Bridges Authority mistaken for police.⁵⁵

The more serious attacks have been hit-and-run shootings targeting policemen mainly in the rural south of Giza. They have all followed a similar modus operandi of the assailants looting weapons and ammunition from their police victims before fleeing. The attacks have forced Giza Police to adapt their police checkpoints by frequently changing locations and building more outposts. The assailants have been able to take advantage of the region’s topology, including farmland and the nearby desert in order to hide, and seem to be methodically picking soft targets to build fighting experience and stock their arsenal.⁵⁶

The deadliest incident was not the result of an attack but rather a police raid on an IED factory in the heart of Giza City itself. In January, police had raided a poultry farm used to manufacture large quantities of IEDs, and intelligence gathered there led them to the apartment hours later.⁵⁷ Militants inside the apartment detonated their explosives, creating a powerful blast that killed at least six policemen, three civilians, and partially destroyed the exterior facade.⁵⁸ The two intercepted warehouses had very significant quantities of explosives materials most likely to be used on the anniversary of the January revolution to blow up the Giza Security Directorate.^c

Interestingly, there were conflicting claims of responsibility for the apartment blast. One group called Revolutionary Punishment (RP), a non-Salafi jihadist militant group believed to be aligned

b The attack also serves as a reminder of Egyptian Islamists’ predisposition to attack religious minorities. An overlooked fact is that ABM’s Nile Valley operatives had partially financed their operations by stealing Christians’ cars and jewelry stores as they kept this activity secret. But an Islamic State-infused cell will almost certainly begin to target Christians methodically in the area for cash and attack houses of worship to instigate strife, much like the Islamist militants of the 1980s-1990s.

c These raids were all part of a pre-January 25 anniversary sweep as mainland militants have marked all previous anniversaries with violence due to its political significance and the usual presence of Islamist protests. For instance, the Revolutionary Punishment militant group announced its founding on January 25, 2015. Police found on a laptop in the Giza apartment pictures and plans to attack various security targets and the Giza Security Directorate as part of a larger spree of attacks marking the anniversary. Mohamed Abdel Rady, Bahgat Abo Deif et al., “Preemptive strike for security services...planned to attack police stations,” *al-Yawm al-Sabi*, January 22, 2016.

with some radicalized Brotherhood factions, claimed responsibility and so did the Islamic State.⁵⁹ Both claimed that the apartment was a “trap” for authorities acting on intelligence they fed, but they failed to explain why it took more than one jihadi to ‘push the button.’ Evidence thus far strongly suggests that Islamic State militants operated the IED factory as authorities were able to establish a connection between the dead suspects and known Islamic State operatives.⁶⁰ The large quantities of explosives found indicate that the group was on the cusp of a major terror campaign after being able to recuperate losses in previous months, serving as a reminder of the group’s resilience and the potential for future major terrorist operations as Islamic State cells improve their operational security.

This incident also raises questions about whether or not groups like RP are in anyway cooperating with the Islamic State. If they are, it would mean the Islamic State may be beginning to get non Salafi-jihadi militants to cooperate, at least tactically, with them.

Bandwagoning?

There are recent indications that the Islamic State has been able to either coopt or ally with additional leftover elements from the pro-al-Qa`ida Ajnad Misr. Police have killed at least eight alleged Ajnad Misr jihadis in major raids around Cairo this year. The cells allegedly carried out unclaimed attacks in the south Cairo area of Helwan. But authorities claim that some alleged Ajnad Misr elements carried out an October 2015 assassination of a Sinai Bedouin

who lived in Cairo that Wilayat Sinai had claimed.⁶¹ If true, it would be further evidence of Islamic State-aligned jihadis building up support among Nile Valley’s militant groups that have hitherto leaned heavily toward al-Qa`ida.

Conclusion

The Egyptian government has thus far been able to check disparate militant groups in the mainland largely due to their amateurish nature and a home-turf advantage in intelligence that has helped thwart plots. Although the Islamic State’s attempts to expand in the Nile Valley through a network of cells in the Giza governorate have so far been uneven and sometimes faltering, if they gather momentum, they could pose a significant threat to Egypt’s security.

There is a real possibility the Islamic State could at some point in the future provide the training, weapons, and leadership to consolidate mainland militants’ efforts and transform them into hardened jihadis, thus escalating the insurgency. The more than 1,000 km-long border with Libya is extremely porous, and the vast bordering Western Desert is a natural sanctuary and staging area for such jihadi activity. How wisely Cairo prosecutes its counterinsurgency efforts in the coming years, and its ability to partner with allies such as the United States for training and modern equipment, will help determine whether the Islamic State will find fertile ground in the Nile Valley. **CTC**

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